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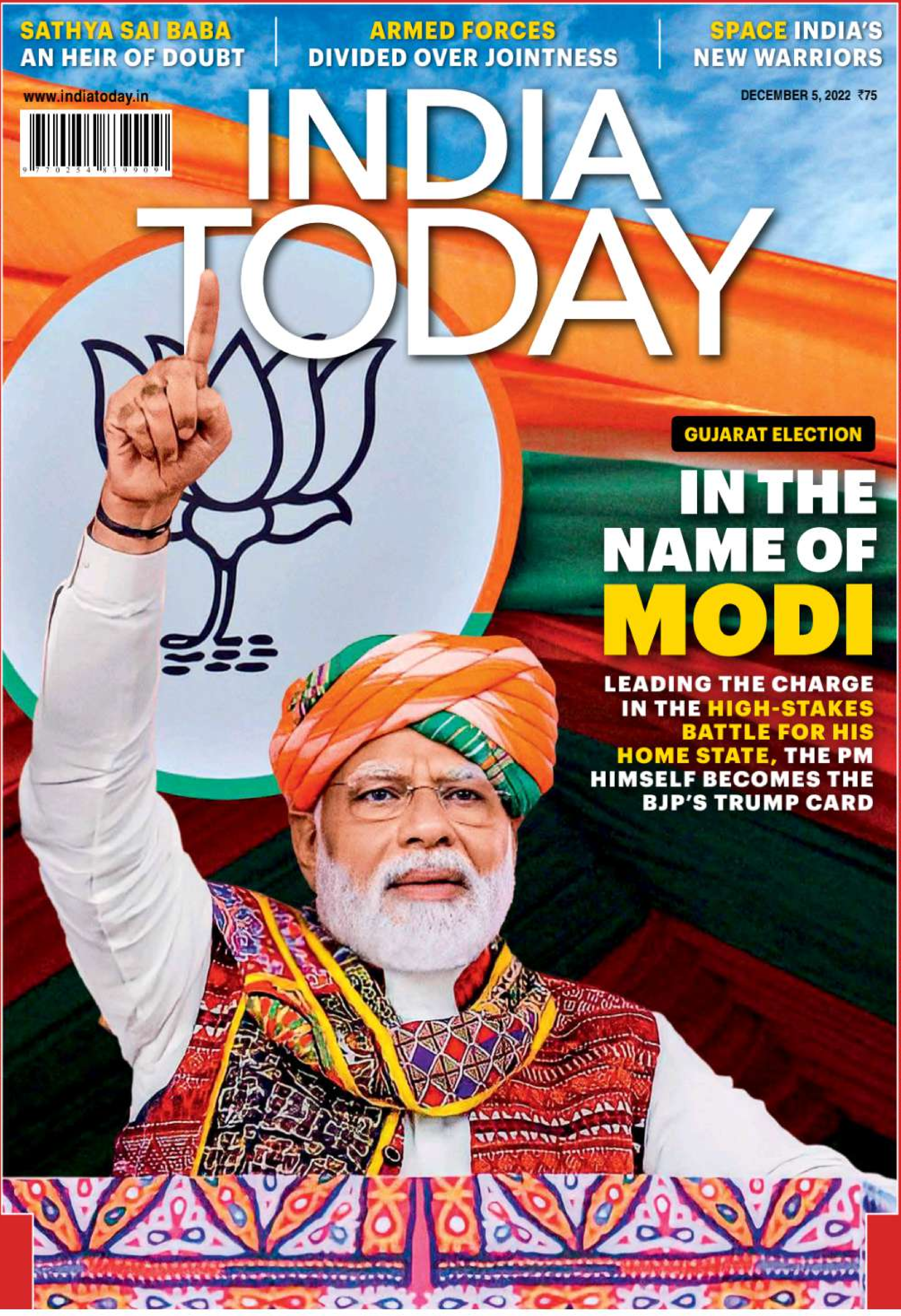

GUJARAT ELECTION

IN THE NAME OF MODI

LEADING THE CHARGE IN THE HIGH-STAKES BATTLE FOR HIS HOME STATE, THE PM HIMSELF BECOMES THE BJP'S TRUMP CARD

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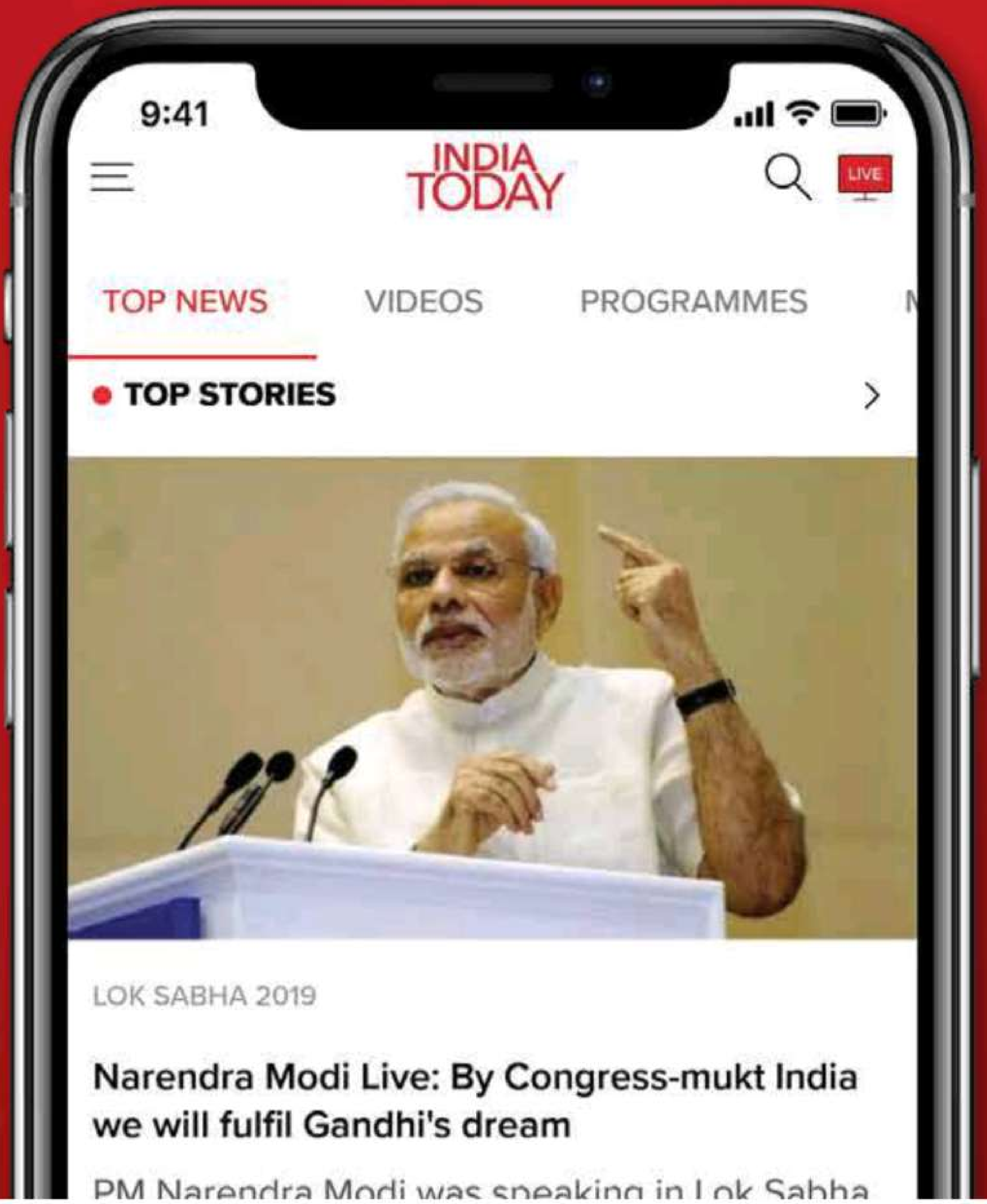

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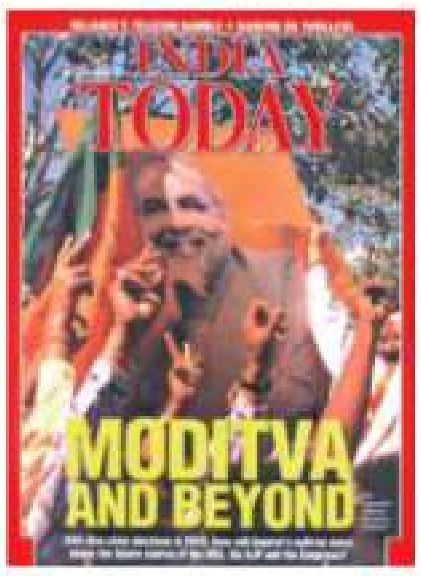
FROM THE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party, the BJP, are at their best during elections. They are made for each other. Modi is relentless in his campaigning and the BJP backs him up with all its might, coupled with meticulous planning. Every election is fought as if their lives depend on it. This is now so visible in his old playground, Gujarat, where he was chief minister for 12 and a half years. This election, a battle for 182 assembly seats, is close to his heart as he has become synonymous with Gujarati *asmita* (pride in identity), that ethereal unbeatable quality. It is an election that most pollsters predict the BJP is certain to win. The only question is not whether but by how many more seats it will do so compared to 2017. Also, whether its tally would surpass that of the highest ever of 149 seats, which the Congress led by Madhavsinh Solanki achieved in 1985.

Modi seems to have decided that it is also his *asmita* at stake in the Gujarat polls. So, he has unleashed a campaign blitzkrieg to secure an emphatic win needed to put wind in the BJP's sails for the big battle of 2024. For a state election due in December 2022, he started early. In July 2021, he inducted OBC leaders from Gujarat during a rejig of the Union cabinet to woo the community that at 37 per cent forms the largest chunk of the state's population. Over the past year, he has been all over Gujarat, in his formal capacity as PM and on purely political sojourns, announcing a bonanza that adds up to Rs 79,000 crore. Since September 28, when he came and stayed the longest—all of nine days—he has visited Gujarat every week. The urgency owes partly to the shock the BJP got in the 2017 assembly polls, when the Congress ran them close, and now to the new entrant, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which has come in with a bag full of rhetoric and freebie promises. This has set rolling a most remarkable spell of strategic micro-management by Modi, who has unleashed a swarm of cannily plotted political and policy moves that only he could have scripted.



December 30, 2002

The first step was to ensure that not even an iota of anti-incumbency remained to stain the record. In one fell swoop in September 2021, former chief minister Vijay Rupani's cabinet was sacked overnight, including the lacklustre Rupani himself. He was the second chief minister to go after Anandiben was shifted out in 2016. Even while distributing seats for the polls, the BJP effected a generational shift, with many stalwarts being denied tickets. Step two was to defang the Congress with a spate of well-chosen defections. The BJP has taken in four dozen turncoats from the party in recent years and braved dissidence to field 17 of them this time. That includes Hardik Patel, the stormy petrel of the Patidar agitation of 2015-17, and OBC leader Alpesh Thakor. Regarding caste equations, the BJP made sure through its seat selection that it had covered all the major bases, including the two decisive sections of voters—the OBCs and the Patidars.

Reviving the buzz around development was also crucial. So, all the nostalgia in the party's slogan of having "built Gujarat together" went hand-in-hand with a spate of hard-nosed policy steps. In October came the Atmanirbhar Gujarat scheme, intended to give an adrenaline shot of capital and power subsidies to MSMEs. A big industry push, even if belated, has been bearing fruit too—in the shape of the Vedanta Foxconn semiconductor plant in Dholera, India's first bulk drug manufacturing plant inaugurated by Modi in Bharuch in October, and soon after, a Tata Airbus manufacturing unit in Vadodara. Meanwhile, steering his old playfield—the cooperatives—Union home minister Amit Shah helped reformulate policy so that tax liability of Rs 8,000 crore could be waived for 1.5-2 million sugar cultivators in the state. The EWS reservation owes its genesis to the Patidar agitation of 2015 and will help keep the community in good humour. Added to that is the wall-to-wall Hindutva symbolism—the remission of the sentence of the Bilkis Bano rape accused being its ultimate statement. It is a space Modi-Shah can now occupy without any legal taint going back to 2002, after the Supreme Court upheld an SIT clean chit mid-year.

Study the intent and critique of his rivals, and even that seems to reconfirm the Modi aura by default: he is the main target. Arvind Kejriwal's AAP has changed the dynamics with his on-ground fusillade, though the fruits of his labour cannot be predicted easily. A decent showing will help bolster its ambition to replace the Congress in the state as the prime challenger to the BJP. On the other hand, Congress seems strangely held back by reticence. Its solid vote endured through the Modi years, rising over the five-year blocs. So, the contrast to 2017, when it netted a 41.4 per cent vote share on the back of the Patidar agitation, is quite stark. Even so, Rahul Gandhi, whose Bharat Jodo Yatra was inexplicably plotted in such a way as to avoid poll-bound Gujarat altogether, decided to pause the caravan in Madhya Pradesh and hop over for a couple of rallies. The result is that pollsters are predicting that rather than a bipolar battle that has been the norm, for the first time, there will be a triangular contest between the BJP, the Congress and AAP. The loser appears to be the Congress, with pre-poll predictions revealing that AAP would eat into the party's sizeable chunk of votes rather than grab the BJP's share. Such a split in the anti-BJP vote will cement the incumbent's position.

That is why there is a special buzz to the election this time. Almost a sense of disequilibrium. A departure from the norm. Ahmedabad-based Senior Associate Editor Jumana Shah tracks the fascinating contest from the ground for this week's cover story, while Deputy Editor Anilesh S. Mahajan taps his sources in the central BJP for insights on the green room. In the past 25 years, Gujarat has settled into an unshakeable unipolarity, with Modi's persona being brick and mortar for that edifice. But if the BJP's oft-repeated ambition of topping Solanki's record must come to pass, it has to break a pattern of decline in seat tally: 127 in 2002, 117 in 2007, 115 in 2012 and 99 in 2017. Counter-intuitively, the Congress went from 51 in 2002 to 59 in 2007, 61 in 2012 and 77 in 2017, its highest tally since 1990. The entry of AAP disturbs that pattern in ways that will be known only on December 8 when the results are announced. How the chips fall then will determine the future of India's politics and Narendra Modi.

(Aroon Purie)

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TUSHAR TANKARIYA

COVER STORY

IN THE NAME OF MODI

Leading the charge in the high-stakes electoral battle for his home state Gujarat, the PM himself becomes his party's trump card

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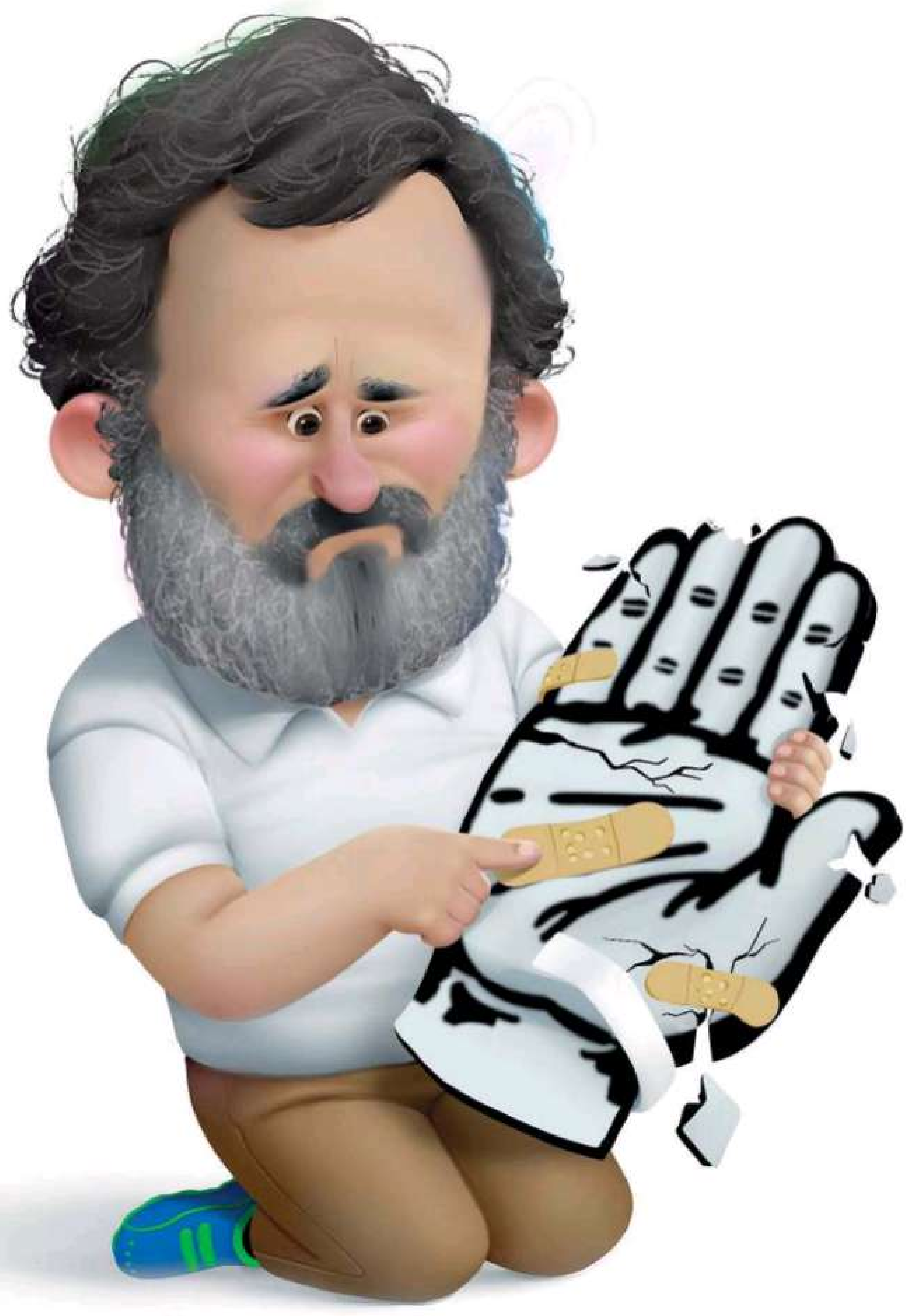
UPFRONT

CONGRESS

THE ANGER GAMES

By Kaushik Deka



It's not easy to frame a generational conflict that bears no clear, fixed ties of affiliation. But the Congress can be said to be loosely split between two halves with a distinct difference of approach—call it the gap between those eager for change and those content to let things hum along with minimum fuss. The assorted members of both sides exhibit this gap even beyond the specific pulls of groupism. The letter that senior party leader Ajay Maken wrote to new party president Mallikarjun Kharge on November 8 is a case in point. Leaked to the media a week later, the letter had a miffed Maken expressing unwillingness to continue as AICC in-charge of Rajasthan. He did not have any moral authority to stay on in that role, he wrote, because there had been no closure on a piece of drama that had played out on September 25 in Jaipur.

This relates to the time when the high command had picked Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot as its candidate for Congress president. Gehlot had come on board but was unwilling to let his bete noire Sachin Pilot replace him as CM. Wanting to have his cake and eat it too, Gehlot played along with the high command's orders to summon a CLP meeting on September 25 in which party MLAs would pass a one-line resolution authorising then Congress president Sonia Gandhi to choose the next CM. But behind the scenes, three Gehlot loyalists—state parliamentary affairs minister Shanti Dhariwal, chief whip Mahesh Joshi and Rajasthan Tourism Development Corporation (RTDC) chairman

Illustration by **SIDDHANT JUMDE**

Dharmendra Rathore—were hatching another plan. Defying the high command, a majority of the MLAs assembled at Dhariwal's residence at the exact same time as the scheduled CLP meet. Kharge and Maken, deputed to oversee the crucial session, sat ashen-faced with Gehlot, the main beneficiary of this boycott, and finally returned empty-handed. Gehlot apologised to Sonia and withdrew from the presidential race. The party had no choice but to let him stay as CM. But almost as a face-saver, a show cause notice was served on the defiant trio.

MALLIKARJUN KHARGE
ASHOK GEHLOT
RAHUL GANDHI
SACHIN PILOT

Yet, two months on, no disciplinary action has been taken against them. Worse, the trio has been assigned the responsibility of coordinating Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra as it enters Rajasthan next month. Maken, a staunch Rahul camp-wallah, is understandably left riled. But Kharge, who too had to stomach the insult in person on September 25, as the MLAs thumbed their nose at the high command, has shown no urgency on that front after becoming president.

Kharge and Maken's divergent approaches are symptomatic of the gap between what can be loosely called the old guard and the young turks. Neither is a cohesive group in itself. The only difference is that the seniors, despite divergent views, back each other when it comes to matters of survival and maintaining status quo in the power structure. The juniors believe this grip of the veterans over the party's decision-making process is what holds back the Congress from advancing with a new narrative and energy. Though, at 61, Shashi Tharoor doesn't exactly qualify as a junior, the three-time Lok Sabha MP is being showcased as a classic case of what it means to be stonewalled by the veterans. Tharoor had contested against Kharge—who was unofficially backed by the Gandhis—in the presidential election, polling 1,072 of the total 9,000 votes. Yet, he has not been made a star campaigner in either Gujarat or Himachal Pradesh. Local Congress units are presently boycotting his events as he makes a foray in the northern parts of home state Kerala. The juniors say he is paying the price of challenging the status quo. The veterans summarily dismiss the idea, though. "I was an MP when I was not even 30," says a steering committee member. "I definitely understand the value of nurturing young blood. But I did not rush to become a minister; instead, I waited for my turn. The young ones must first perform, and rewards will come in due course."

THE VETERANS PREVAIL DUE TO THEIR FINANCIAL CLOUT, WHICH HELPS FUND THE BIG EVENTS

The younger lot cite the fate of Pilot and Jyotiraditya Scindia. As president of Rajasthan Congress, Pilot had led the party to victory in the 2018 assembly polls, but the CM's chair went to Gehlot. In Madhya Pradesh, Scindia was seen as the popular face, but the high command chose Kamal Nath. While Pilot attempted a coup in 2020, Scindia defected to the BJP and brought down the Kamal Nath regime. "In both cases, the late Ahmed Patel and a group of seniors like Ambika Soni and Mukul Wasnik prevailed upon the Gandhis. Even now, they keep saying Rajasthan will fall if Gehlot is removed. Congress will certainly lose next year if Gehlot continues. It may lose even under Pilot, but if a young leader is made the CM, it will at least galvanise other state units," says a former Union minister.

Of course, the lines are not always drawn according to age. The veterans cite the example of Himanta Biswa Sarma, whom several seniors, including Patel, backed but did not allow to replace Tarun Gogoi as Assam CM. "Even Sonia wanted Himanta as CM," says a Rajya Sabha MP. "But Rahul blocked the decision." Sarma defected to the BJP, who made him CM six years after he joined in 2015, allowing Sarbananda Sonowal to serve out a term.

The age lines get blurred even with debates on policy, but the gap plays into those. While all states barring West Bengal have implemented the New Pension Scheme (NPS), Congress-ruled Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh have decided to restore the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). In the run-up to the elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the party has promised to revert to the OPS. One section of the party is unhappy with this. Praveen Chakravarty, who heads the party's data analytics department, tweeted: "Out of 65 million people in Gujarat, about 300,000 are in government service. The OPS will cost roughly 15 per cent of tax revenues. Why should the top 0.5 per cent of people get 15 per cent of all taxpayers' money?" Known for his proximity to Rahul and former PM Manmohan Singh, Chakravarty faced flak from several party colleagues, including Rajya Sabha MP and Congress general secretary in charge of communications Jairam Ramesh. Former finance minister P. Chidambaram, on the other hand, is opposed to OPS, though he has made no public statement yet. His opposition on another issue—10 per cent quota for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS)—recently forced the Congress to alter its stand. When the Supreme Court, on November 7, upheld the constitutional validity of the amendment brought by the Narendra Modi government to implement that quota, the Congress initially welcomed it. Ramesh said the amendment was the result of a process the Manmohan-led UPA government had initiated in 2005-6. Gehlot too chipped in, saying, "This will help the poor get justice." In contrast, both Chidambaram, and his Lok Sabha MP-son Karthi, questioned the judgment. Another Tamil Nadu MP, S. Jothimani, echoed them. Then Ramesh, on November 11, said the party was doing a "deep think" on the SC verdict.

The relative lack of cohesion among the juniors also owes to the variable patronage of seniors. A certain fear has taken root after the exit of young turks like Scindia, Jitin Prasada, R.P.N. Singh and Sushmita Dev. Once seen as core members of the team around Rahul, electoral compulsions and their failure to negotiate the intrigues of the seniors forced them to quit. "If those backed by Rahul did not stand a chance, why ask about others? Nor can the Gandhis afford to upset the apple cart as they need the financial clout of the seniors to fight polls or organise events such as the Udaipur Chintan Shivir or the Bharat Jodo Yatra," says a Rajya Sabha MP. It was not without reason that the shivir was held in Rajasthan or Gehlot has been made Gujarat and Chhattisgarh poll in-charge. "Money speaks louder than performance and popularity," says a former CM. That's what keeps the Congress trapped in the vicious cycle of patronage politics. ■

FORCED CIVILITY
Kerala CM Pinarayi with governor Arif Mohammad Khan

ANI

KERALA

STATUTORY TIFF

By Jeemon Jacob

There seems to be no let-up in the mortal combat between the governor and the chief minister in God's own country. Kerala governor Arif Mohammad Khan was in New Delhi when the ruling Left Democratic Front mounted a mega protest under the banner of the 'Education Protection Forum' outside the Raj Bhavan in Thiruvananthapuram against what it called Khan's attempts to "saffronise educational institutions" in the state. Khan watched on television as CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury inaugurated the protests, calling it a people's movement against a governor trying to execute a right-wing political agenda.

"Kerala is the only state where an individual is treated like a human being and not on the basis of caste or religion," Yechury said. "The BJP is trying to destroy Kerala's unique identity and we will fight the dark forces with undying spirit."

The CPI(M) is making common cause with other Opposition parties that are similarly resisting the BJP's efforts to destabilise non-BJP governments through governors asserting their constitutional authority over elected governments. The battle in Kerala itself has been going on for nearly a year, with Khan taking on the Pinarayi Vijayan government on a number of issues. Those run a controversial gamut, from smuggling onward, but the prize fight is over what Khan calls "nepotism" in the appointment of vice-chancellors to universities in the state.

Neither Pinarayi nor his cabinet ministers were personally present at the protest meet. Joining the cause instead was the M.K. Stalin-led DMK government in Tamil Nadu, which sent Rajya Sabha MP Tiruchi Siva to address the protesters. Extending his party's support, Siva modified the protest march slogan 'Mr Khan, you are wrong. This is Kerala' by adding: 'This is South

India' to it, thus making the battleground wider. CPI(M) state secretary M.V. Govindan Master criticised Khan for gubernatorial overreach. "Who is supreme in democracy?" he asked. "We, the people. Not the governors, who are mere political nominees. Their role is to safeguard the Constitution and function democratically. But the Kerala governor is acting like a Sangh Parivar agent. We will not allow it."

THE COURTS' QUASHING OF SOME V-C APPOINTMENTS HAS ENCOURAGED KHAN TO MAKE A CASE AGAINST ALL V-Cs

Khan is no stranger to controversy. Addressing the Indian History Congress session in Kannur in December 2021, he used the occasion to defend the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. The 31-minute ex tempore speech was shouted down by the delegates. Among the protesters was celebrated Left historian Prof. Irfan Habib, who asked the governor not to use the occasion for political rhetoric. Khan later asked the Kannur University V-C Gopinath Raveendran to register a police complaint against the organisers for heckling him during his address. However, after watching the videos, the police refused to frame charges against Prof. Habib. Ever since, Khan has been trying to get his own back at the Left-leaning academic spaces in Kerala.

He spotted his opportunity when the Supreme Court quashed the appointment of M.S. Rajasree as the V-C of the APJ Abdul Kalam Technological

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UP/ MAINPURI

TACTICAL TRUCE

By Prashant Srivastava

ANI

FOR MULAYAM'S SAKE
SP Mainpuri candidate Dimple with husband and party chief Akhilesh Yadav and his uncle Shivpal Singh Yadav

In all the din surrounding the assembly elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, few may have noticed the excitement around the bypoll in Mainpuri, stronghold of the recently departed Samajwadi Party patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav. Voting for the Lok Sabha seat, necessitated by his demise last month, will be on December 5, and the result announced on December 8.

How crucial is it? Well, crucial enough for hatchets to be buried between Akhilesh Yadav, SP chief and son of Mulayam, and his often-estranged uncle Shivpal. The Yadav clan has come together to throw its weight behind Dimple Yadav, wife of Akhilesh. Mainpuri constituency's borders run close to Mulayam's ancestral village Saifai. More than any wider politics, thus, it has become somewhat of a prestige election, with the SP keen that the seat stay with the family and the BJP seeing it as a fair chance to breach the old Mulayam bastion.

Of course, the SP goes into the election with a huge sympathy wave for 'Netaji'. Enter any village in these parts and everyone will have a Mulayam story to tell you. Prayag Singh, a dhaba owner in Mainpuri's Karhal area, is grateful to him for the four-lane road in front of his dhaba. No other leader cared for his constituency like Netaji, he asserts. The dhaba staff recall how Mulayam had stopped by there sometime in the 1990s for a simple meal of dal-roti. And ever since, he made a pit stop at the dhaba whenever he passed by.

That affection should now transfer to Dimple. Pushpa Devi, a 49-year-old woman from Bewar village, is waiting outside the SP office in Mainpuri where she is supposed to arrive. "We have been a supporter of Netaji's family for the past 25 years," she says. "Now, his bahu is contesting the polls. We will support her." Similarly, Pushpa Yadav, a 23-year-old college student, claims that Netaji had visited her family when she was born. It is only natural then that she campaign for "*bhabhi*", as she calls Dimple.

Dimple was considered best suited to carry forward Mulayam's legacy in this old fortress, even though Akhilesh's cousins Tej Pratap Yadav and Dharmendra Yadav were also in the fray. Dimple's name was finalised after a series of meetings between Akhilesh and party leaders from the Muslim and Yadav communities in Mainpuri as well as with elders in the Yadav clan in Saifai.

Mainpuri has been a bastion of the SP's first family since 1996 when Mulayam was first elected an MP from here. He contested successfully from the seat three more times—in 2004, 2009 and 2019. Nephew Tej Pratap won the seat in a 2014 bypoll. Despite the apparent Yadav predominance, the caste equations in Mainpuri are interestingly complex. Says a senior SP leader, "Shakya and Thakur votes are crucial here. That's why we recently made

University in Thiruvananthapuram on October 21 for violating UGC norms. The panel had recommended only one name instead of the three required. Citing the judgment, Khan issued notices to all 13 V-Cs who were appointed in a similar manner. On November 14, a division bench of the Kerala High Court quashed the appointment of K. Riji John as the V-C of the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences (KUFOS) on similar grounds.

Irked by Khan's relentless hounding on the issue, the Kerala government has decided to send him an ordinance, removing the governor as the chancellor of state universities. It has left Khan unperturbed. "I am yet to see it. If it comes, I will refer it to the President," he says.

Nor did the roaring protests in Thiruvananthapuram curb his enthusiasm. "Give me one instance where I have tried to interfere in the business of the government, and I shall resign that very moment. I can give you 1,001 examples where they interfered in the functioning of universities daily," he says. Khan is clear on one point. "All 13 V-C appointments in Kerala are illegal. They must go."

Indeed, the state government is not on very firm ground on the issue. "It is paying for bureaucratic faux pas in appointing V-Cs," is all that a senior bureaucrat could say in defence, speaking to INDIA TODAY. "Had the panel listed three names, the governor would have appointed the person the government preferred." By leaving the loophole, the Pinarayi regime has handed Khan a ready stick to beat it with, and help the BJP agenda. Never mind that governments are answerable to the electorate, not ceremonial heads. ■

MANY SAY SHIVPAL HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO BACK DIMPLE, TO AVOID BEING SEEN AS BETRAYING NETAJI AFTER HIS DEATH

Alok Shakya the new president of the Mainpuri district. And Dimple was a Thakur by caste before marriage."

And what of Shivpal, who has often chafed at nephew Akhilesh's takeover of the SP? Well, a source close to Shivpal says he had no option but to support Dimple. "Had he contested himself or fielded a candidate from his Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party (Lohia) against Dimple, he would have been perceived to be working against Mulayam's *bahu* just a few days after the leader's death. Shivpal's role in the election is significant, as his assembly constituency Jaswantnagar, from where he has been elected six times, falls under the Mainpuri Lok Sabha constituency."

But the truce, even if it be temporary, was effected honourably as Akhilesh and Dimple visited Shivpal in Saifai to seek his blessings. Shivpal relented and asked his party workers to ensure Dimple's victory. In a tweet after the meeting, Akhilesh said, "Along with the blessings of 'Netaji' and the elders of the family, the people of Mainpuri are also with us." He also shared a picture of the meeting.

If Dimple can replicate the massive wins Mulayam used to register—logging between 50-60 per cent of the votes—she can make Mainpuri her constituency in 2024, especially because she had lost from Kannauj in 2019. But it's going to be no walkover: the BJP's booth management and its plan to woo non-Yadav OBC voters are a challenge.

Aware of the significance of the Shakya vote, the saffron party is fielding Raghu Raj Shakya against Dimple. The Shakya vote adds up to nearly 300,000 in Mainpuri, the second highest after the Yadavs. Raghu Raj is perceived to be a Shivpal protégé, and the BJP was hoping that the PSPL chief might help him directly or indirectly.

The party is leaving no stone unturned in its plan to inflict a humiliating defeat on the SP in its own backyard. Defence minister Rajnath Singh is visiting, as are Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath, deputy CMs Keshav Prasad Maurya and Brajesh Pathak. Other state ministers too will be setting up camp in Mainpuri. Nagendra Sikarwar, the BJP state general secretary for the Braj zone and also a key strategist for the Mainpuri seat, told INDIA TODAY, "Our preparations are going well. Our candidate is local and has a good people connect. The SP claims it has the support of Muslims and Yadavs, but we have the support of all communities. Even if you subtract the M-Y vote from the 17 lakh voters, we will still have the direct support of over 11 lakh voters. The BJP is the first choice of non-Yadav OBCs, which is why we secured such a huge majority in the assembly election. We have the support of Shakyas, Lodhs and Thakurs. Also, you can't discount the Modi and Yogi factors anywhere in UP."

The non-Yadav OBC vote is an obvious point of focus—it has asked all its top non-Yadav OBC leaders to hold public meetings in Mainpuri. Besides, the BJP is banking on forward caste and Dalit votes. It also makes light of the SP narrative of a united family. "Akhileshji remembered his uncle because of elections; this is called the fear of defeat," senior BJP leader Sidharth Nath Singh said. At the same time, BJP leaders are careful not to attack Shivpal, to keep their options open for 2024.

But Prof. Pankaj Kumar, who teaches political science at Allahabad University, does not see much hope for the BJP after the *chacha-bhatija* reunion. "Even if it's not a lasting one," he says, "it will yield the desired result for the bypoll. The Shakyas may have good numbers, but the Yadavs number over 4.5 lakh. And they are emotionally charged after Mulayam's death." What will matter is the margin. As for the BJP, while it goes all out, one eye is also set on the bigger prize: the 2024 election. ■

PRASANTO K. ROY

GUEST COLUMN

PROTECTING DATA, NOT PRIVACY

It's been over five years since a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court gave a unanimous ruling holding privacy to be a fundamental right, enshrined in India's Constitution. The landmark judgment, one of whose authors is now the Chief Justice of India, clarified that the right to privacy could be infringed only when there was a compelling state interest for doing so. And it opened up the path to a privacy law, one that India still does not have.

The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Bill (DPDP), 2022, released by the ministry of electronics and information technology on November 18, inches towards that law on a meandering path. It is a big step forward, but, as many are pointing out, at least half a step back. We have been there. In 2018, a committee headed by Justice B.N. Srikrishna, after extensive consultations, came up with a report and a draft. After public feedback, a revised bill was tabled in Parliament in December 2019, and then referred to a joint parliamentary committee. The Covid-19 pandemic paused life, and the joint parliamentary committee finally tabled its report in the Lok Sabha in December 2021. Its 81 changes turned the bill into a new animal that was found to be a disaster: mandating local storage of data, throwing in non-personal data into the mix, among other things. So intense was the criticism that the government withdrew the bill and went back to the drawing board. The result is the latest version.

This particular iteration of the data bill has a lot going for it from the industry's viewpoint. It has been simplified and contentious clauses such as criminal penalties (and whopping fines of a percentage of global turnover) have been removed. There's no non-personal data anymore, so businesses won't be forced to share proprietary data with the government—say, data about Uber's traffic and rides. Data localisation has been softened: your email and other data on global services will be allowed to be transferred to some trusted nations, to be notified by the government.

Over a dozen loose ends have been left for the government to fix, rather than the regulator. The government is probably the biggest processor of data. The *de facto* regulator is expected to regulate itself

All good so far. So, why are privacy and civil society activists unhappy? Because this bill is not so great for privacy, unlike Europe's landmark General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) law. The DPDP bill proposes near-blanket exemptions for government agencies from complying with key rules. It weakens the regulator proposed for this purpose: earlier named the Data Protection Authority, it will now be a board, beholden to the government. Over a dozen loose ends have been left for the government to fix, rather than the regulator. What is likely the country's biggest processor of data has become the *de facto* regulator, one that will effectively regulate itself.

Something that has really riled up civil society is the word 'digital' in the title, which narrows and limits the bill's scope, excluding information captured in a paper form. It also specifies automated processing only, a strange restriction that suggests that manually leaking personal information, or even taking a picture of a form with personal data and sharing it over email or on social media, may be excluded from the ambit of the bill.

What's next? Public consultation for the bill is on till December 17. If feedback is seriously incorporated, the ministry will take some time to rework the draft, and it is unlikely to be tabled in the winter session of Parliament, though it could make it there by February. The pushback is unlikely to be strong enough to delay it beyond that: corporate India is largely supportive of it, so criticism will likely be left to civil society and privacy activists.

Up ahead, beyond this bill, a new Digital India Act is expected to replace India's ageing Information Technology Act of 2000 (as well as this data protection bill, and a very contentious telecom bill whose draft was released in October this year).

If we do have a data protection law in 2023—this is not a privacy law—it won't be a month too soon. According to United Nations data, 137 out of 194 countries have put in place privacy and data protection laws. India is way, way behind the curve. ■

Prasanto K. Roy is a technology and public policy consultant

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से, कहीं भी, कभी भी

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जम्मू-कश्मीर

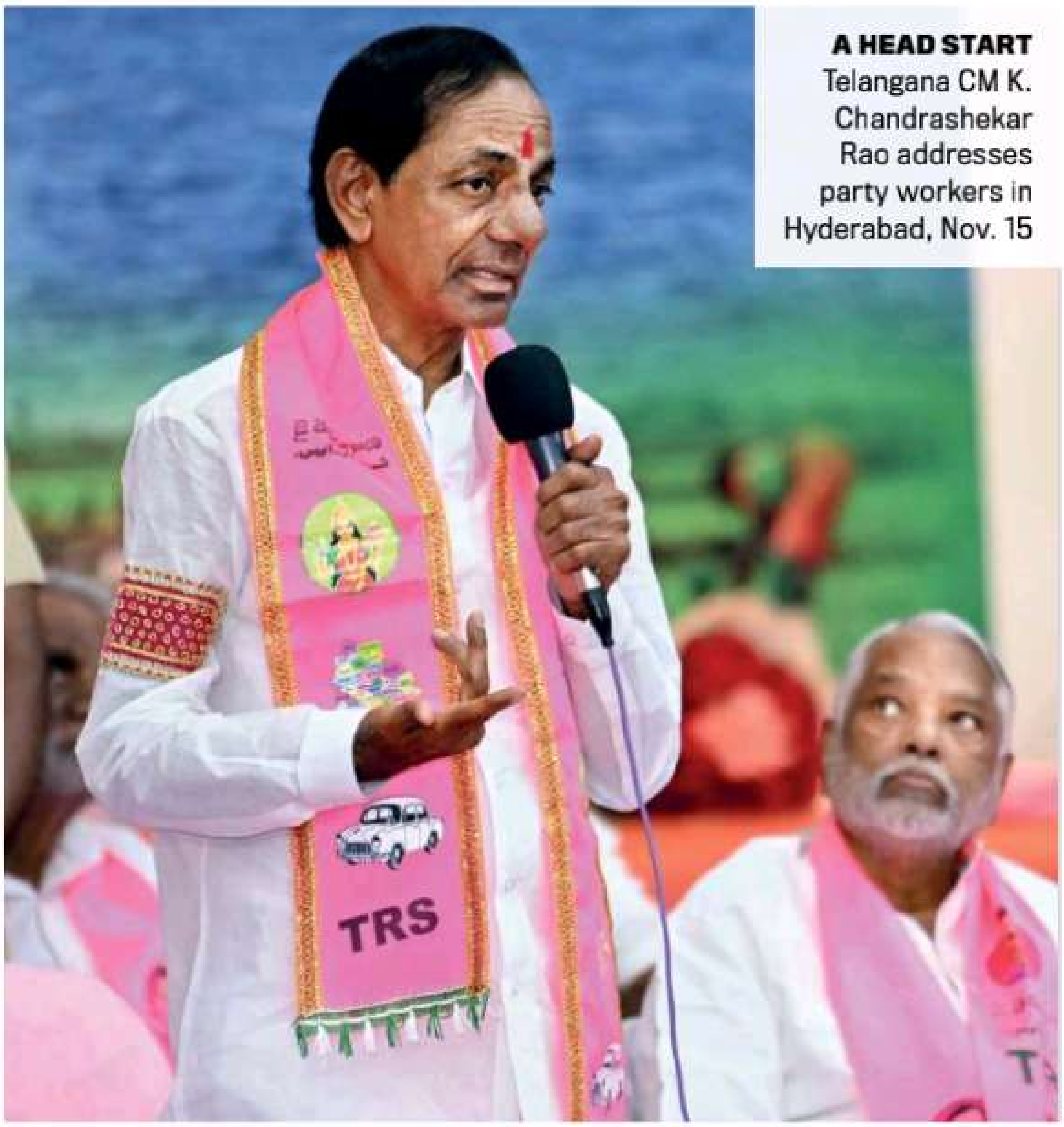
जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

TELANGANA

WAR OF DHARMA

By Amarnath K. Menon



A HEAD START Telangana CM K. Chandrashekar Rao addresses party workers in Hyderabad, Nov. 15

ANI

If rival parties expected the Telangana Rashtra Samithi's (TRS) slim 10,000-vote victory margin in the crucial Munugode assembly bypoll to have sapped the will of its supremo K. Chandrashekar Rao (KCR), they miscalculated terribly. If anything, the near-win seems to have only spurred the Telangana chief minister to go all guns blazing into campaign mode for the assembly election, even if it's a year away. Eyeing a third straight term in power, KCR has declared a 'dharma yuddh' (righteous war) on the BJP, now often seen as its main political adversary in the state. He exhorted party workers to wage a fierce battle against the fast-growing saffron party in order to "save the democratic system".

All his pronouncements shone with the confidence that comes to those who have everything at stake. "Every party worker should become a KCR and confront them. We need not fear or hesitate to call out their misdeeds.... They are becoming a threat to the entire nation," he told second-rung TRS leaders on November 15. He ruled out advancing the election like he had done six months before his first term as CM was to end in 2018. For good measure, to quell any misgivings that might perchance infect the ranks, he added that most sitting TRS MLAs will contest from their constituencies. What he rolled out, in effect, was a full 365-day battle plan.

The year ahead will be used to ensure that welfare and development programmes reach the last mile: data on all beneficiaries is being collated to cultivate a connect with the electorate at the polling booth level. Besides, the TRS chief plans to work on winning back the support of sections he alienated over the past eight years. The 'saturation strategy' that proved useful in Munugode—now christened the 'Munugode model'—will be deployed across the state, with each key party worker reaching out to 100 voters even as the MLAs focus on their respective constituencies. A databank of voter in-charges is being created to enable smooth coordination.

KCR will hold meetings with ministers and MLAs every fortnight, besides online interactions with local leaders—a significant shift considering the state cabinet met just four times in 2022. MLAs and constituency in-charges will host *athmeeya sammelans* (community meetings) to address grievances and connect with millennials unaware of the TRS-led statehood campaign that led to the formation of Telangana. The Munugode model is also about building political and social coalitions: the alliance with the CPI and the CPI(M) played a decisive role there. While staying with that model, KCR plans to plot out the TRS's own strengths and weaknesses in every constituency.

Telangana's financial health remains a big worry, though, because of the Centre's adverse responses on grants and the state's share of taxes. Recruitment of teachers for schools and colleges as well as their salaries and pensions have been getting delayed. Corrective measures on these fronts will be necessary to minimise the impact of anti-incumbency and build a positive campaign.

For the BJP, Telangana is a crucial arena: after Karnataka, it's the second flank through which it hopes to prise open the South. A good showing here will carry a lot of material and symbolic

> **KCR HAS DECLARED A 'DHARMA YUDDH' (WAR OF RIGHTEOUSNESS) ON THE BJP A YEAR AHEAD OF THE STATE ELECTION IN DECEMBER 2003**

value six months ahead of general elections. What it hopes to do is tap into the disenchantment of the youth and lasso in OBC voters. With no dearth of resources, the BJP is also wooing middle-rung TRS and Congress leaders. But the party seems to lack the organisational strength on the ground needed to mount a sustained state-wide campaign against the TRS. This is where KCR sees an advantage; hence his well-oiled party machinery is focusing on mobilisation of voters at the booth level.

The image of KCR as a benevolent authority figure, however, has been eroded over the years, says Harathi Vageeshan, who teaches political science at the NALSAR University of Law. "He has no option now but to be aggressive and deliver on his promises. This was evident in the way he inaugurated medical colleges online from Pragathi Bhavan (his official residence) on November 15," Vageeshan adds. KCR inaugurated eight medical colleges and promised to open 17 more in the next two years so that there is at least one state-run medical college in each of the 33 districts. The final year of his term may not be the earliest he could have done this, but he's at that stage where the old adage—better late than never—buzzes with a certain urgency. ■

RAJASTHAN

A QUESTION OF GENDER LAW

By Rohit Parihar

In a society where it is still an uphill battle for women who seek justice in cases of gender-related crime, instances of women filing allegedly false cases of rape or dowry harassment form a contentious layer of legal action that has polarised the field. Taking serious note of what is seen as a misuse of laws intended to protect women, the Rajasthan State Commission of Women has advised the police to take strict action against women whose complaints are found to be false. But this has made women's groups and human rights organisations see red. On November 2, activists stormed into the commission's Jaipur office protesting against what they call a regressive move that could increase the vulnerability of female survivors.

Women activists say while anyone making false accusations can attract legal action, it is not the commission's mandate to recommend action against complainants. "Nowhere else in India and never before in Rajasthan has a women's commission taken such a stand," says Kavita Srivastava, president of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), Rajasthan. In a memorandum submitted to the commission's chairperson Rehana Riyaz, several women's organisations said they were "extremely disappointed" by the "anti-women stand and action".

राजस्थान राज्य महिला आयोग

RAISING THE ISSUE Rajasthan State Commission of Women chairperson Rehana Riyaz

PURUSHOTTAM DIWAKAR

The debate began after Riyaz, who took over as the commission chairperson in February, expressed anguish over a large number of complaints turning out false and claimed women were taking "undue advantage" of laws meant to protect them. She said the commission identified 418 such cases and asked the police to see if complainants in 60 of them could be proceeded against. "It's wrong to say we are ordering prosecution or are biased against complainants. Rather, we are ensuring the law is not gender-biased and investigations are fair towards both complainant and accused," she said.

Her stand seems to flow from CM

Ashok Gehlot's insistence that a rising graph of FIRs doesn't imply a rise in crimes as many FIRs turn out to be based on false complaints. Speaking at a police event in September, Gehlot had claimed "56 per cent of rape cases are false" and directed the DGP to take legal action against those who lodge such cases. The police has also initiated prosecution against complainants in a few dowry-related cases the courts held to be false. Some cases are held up as exemplars of a trend: in Ladnu, Nagaur district, a gang rape accusation turned out to be foisted on a man by his father-in-law, angry over the refusal of an exchange marriage; in Jahazpur, Bhilwara, an elopement brought the charge on a 17-year-old's groom of choice.

Ayyub Khan, registrar-cum-OSD with the commission, says the police and judges can decide whether to proceed against such false complainants—under sections 182 (furnishing false information to a public official) and 211 (making a false allegation of offence) of the IPC, conviction can lead to imprisonment of up to seven years. "We can't order prosecution, but want to discourage false complaints so we can focus on genuine cases," Khan says.

"NOWHERE ELSE IN INDIA AND NEVER BEFORE IN RAJASTHAN HAS A WOMEN'S COMMISSION TAKEN SUCH A STAND," SAYS KAVITA SRIVASTAVA OF PUCL-RAJASTHAN

The question is whether it holds the potential to discourage *genuine* complainants. The commission has initiated a process where complaints are first sent to the district collector and superintendent of police (SP), and the complainant is advised to contact those officers. If the police find the complaint to be genuine, an FIR is lodged. If not, the commission informs the complainant and asks the SP concerned to review the investigation. "It is only if the SP-level officer again finds the case to be false that we advise the police to act against the complainant for acting to harass the other party," says Riyaz.

Prima facie, its critics say, the process seems to presume, almost as the default, that an accusation of a gender-related crime could be false. And since the number of bureaucratic hoops one has to negotiate can seem forbidding to a genuine complainant, it's moot whether the solution is worse than the problem. ■

WEST BENGAL

DIDI TAKES RO

By Romita Datta

DEBAJYOTI CHAKRABORTY

At no time was the Trinamool Congress's stranglehold over West Bengal politics better demonstrated than at the 2018 panchayat polls—it won around 90 per cent of the seats, of which 34 per cent were uncontested. Much of it was attributed to alleged violence and intimidatory tactics against opposition parties. But, with the next panchayat polls earmarked for early 2023, the TMC finds its unquestioned ground-level supremacy severely eroded. A spate of crimes in which TMC members were allegedly involved has led the widespread perception of the state being gripped by lawlessness; the alleged teachers' recruitment scam and the arrest of former minister Partha Chatterjee has further deepened the distrust and dismay felt about the TMC's governance. Some remedy is desperately called for. On November 10, at an administrative meeting in Ranaghat in Nadia district, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee asked public representatives and block development officers to cover even the remotest of villages on humble cycles and rickshaws, not stick to SUVs on well-travelled roads. With elected TMC panchayat officials also accused of high-handedness, it's a hard road to redemption.

Indeed, battered and broken roads can well stand in as a metaphor for all the real problems people face, like those related to drinking water, healthcare and electricity—the chief themes that will influence voting to the three-tier panchayat system comprising zilla parishads, panchayat samitis and gram panchayats. "I request you to take roads seriously. Otherwise you'll regret it later," Mamata told the officials admonishingly.

In a way, the TMC has been forced to hit the roads in earnest. Taking advantage of the ruling party's discomfiture in recent months, opposition parties have gone to the grassroots to give shape to popular grievances. The Left, in particular, has been sweating it out for the past year, exhorting people to hold the government accountable. For instance, after the construction of a road in Bardhaman district's Galsi was left unfinished, villagers held a demonstration outside the panchayat office. Already, as part of the *Chor dhoro, jail bhoro* (catch the thieves, throw them in jails) programme of the Left launched in August,

AD TO REDEMPTION

MARCH IS THE MESSAGE
West Bengal minister Chandrima Bhattacharya (third from left) with other TMC women leaders at a village in Murshidabad district

grassroots-level officials at villages and blocks are under public surveillance. "The teacher's recruitment scam has made things difficult. People don't believe us even if a genuine bottleneck in the release of funds delays panchayat work. They are mobbing our houses and branding us as thieves," says a panchayat samiti member of Ausgram in Bardhaman. Other leaders, too, admit that people are emboldened now to demand their due. "We are being held accountable. The general belief is that TMC leaders have made money by looting the common man. Even those like us who live a humble life face uncomfortable questions about the lifestyle of some leaders. After the arrests of Parthada and Anubratada (TMC's Birbhum strongman Anubrata Mondal), we could not meet people. They made fun of us," says another TMC leader. It's this state of affairs the TMC wants to correct.

THE TMC HAS BEEN FORCED TO HIT THE ROADS AS THE LEFT HAS BEEN STEADILY HOLDING IT ACCOUNTABLE FOR, AMONG OTHER THINGS, UNFINISHED PROJECTS

All this has come after a renewed burst of activism from the Left. Hundreds of its roadshows and rallies pointed to gross inequities in society: thousands of educated, unemployed youth against jobs being sold at a premium (as in the alleged scam), the poor living on doles juxtaposed with the jaw-dropping affluence of even local-level politicians and so on. Naturally, it has struck a chord with people.

In a desperate attempt to weave a counter-narrative, Mamata has decided to deploy her women's brigade. Titled Cholo Gram-ey Jai (let's visit villages), the outreach programme is targeting women and using them to spread the good word about the TMC's governance. About 90 per cent of women in Bengal are beneficiaries of various government schemes. The basic monthly allowance of Rs 1,000 (for SCs/ STs) and Rs 500 (for others) under the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme has benefited 15 million women. Besides this, there is the Kanyashree stipend for 8 million girl students, cycles for girls (*saboojsathis*) and Swasthyasathi health cards for women. All this has helped create a loyal base of women voters for the TMC. A Lokniti-CSDS survey showed that in the 2021 assembly polls, while 46 per cent of the male vote went to TMC, as many as 50 per cent women voters supported Mamata. The TMC is politically indebted to women; in her hour of need, Mamata has now turned to them.

Under the Cholo Gram-ey Jai programme, members of TMC's women's wing have started spreading out across villages from November 1. The programme will last for two and a half months. Through informal meetings, they are engaging rural women. "We want them to air their grievances. The CM has asked us to check if all are getting their share under various schemes. Our teams will give them a hearing and ensure prompt redressal," says state finance minister Chandrima Bhattacharya, who is overseeing the outreach.

The Left seems equally keen to head off this counter. Its new programme, Adhikar Yatra (rights march), plans to reach out to the remotest of areas and raise awareness about basic livelihood issues, including wages of working class and poor people. Whether all this will bear political fruit during the panchayat polls remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: Bengal's parties can ignore the call of the open roads only at their peril. ■

GLASSHOUSE

WHAT'S IN A PLACE?

When Congress leader Ajay Maken addressed a presser on November 22, 2022 to expose the alleged irregularities in the free electricity scheme of the AAP government in Delhi, more than the subject, the venue attracted attention. Instead of the AICC HQ at 24, Akbar Road, it was held at the Constitution Club. Was Maken not given space because he had dared to offer his resignation as AICC general secretary in-charge of Rajasthan? Party insiders deny any such injunction; it was Maken who apparently chose Constitution Club because he wanted to offer journos some lunch. But AICC HQ has a running canteen where journos often eat. Just saying.

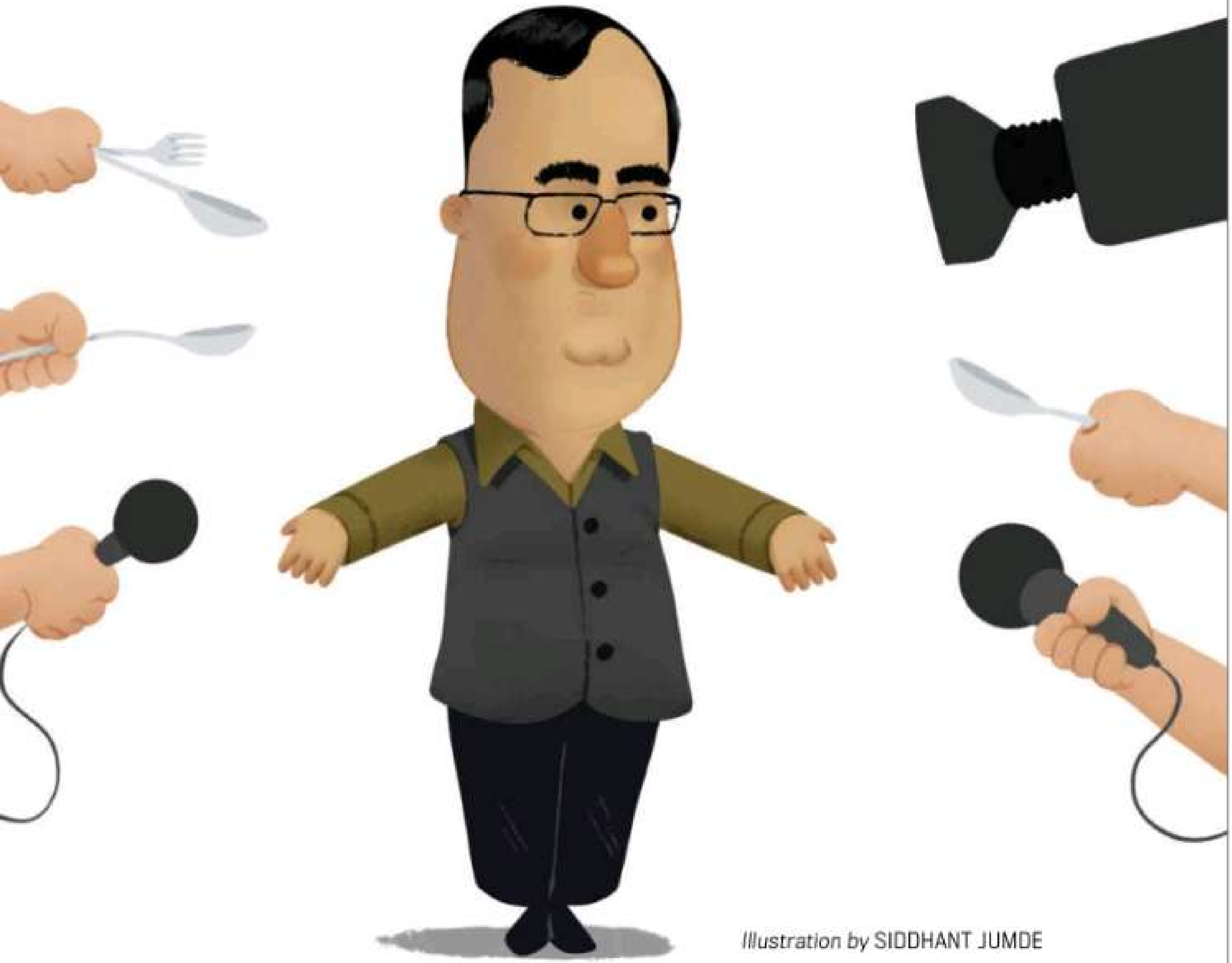


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

INVECTIVE ATTACK

The Twitter handle of Samajwadi Party's media department is getting a lot of traction these days. But not for its content. The tweets are becoming downright abusive of BJP leaders, and even of local journalists. Ruling BJP leaders are being called *dalal* (broker), *baudambaaz* (foolish), *Aankh ke andhe* (blind). Not all SP leaders are happy as they fear it will hurt the party's image and justify the BJP charge of SP being a *gundon ki party* (party of goons). A senior leader plans to raise it with SP chief **Akhilesh Yadav** though he's amazed he hasn't noticed it till now. Others wonder who's handling the account. Has the job been outsourced to an outsider?

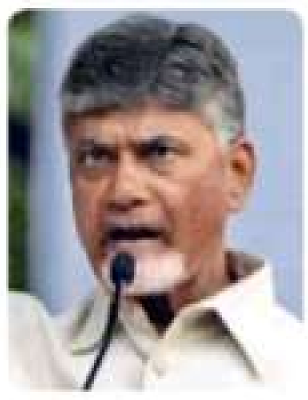
CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

Safe Seat-hunting

Congress leader **Siddaramaiah**'s visit to Kolar earlier this month piqued curiosity on whether he was eyeing the southern assembly seat near Bengaluru to contest in the Karnataka polls due in May. While the former CM kept everybody guessing—on whether he will return to home turf in Varuna in Mysuru or stay in current seat Badami in north Karnataka or settle for Kolar—opponents have been taking pot shots at the search for a "safe seat". This week, when the party invited applications from prospective candidates, Siddaramaiah apparently didn't specify any seat, leaving the decision to the high command.

Friend to Foe

In July 2017, when Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar rejoined the NDA, he made **Pashupati Kumar Paras**, who was not a member of any house then, a cabinet minister, and sent him to the upper house. Again, when Paras was inducted in the Union cabinet at the cost of his estranged nephew Chirag Paswan in July 2021, it had Nitish's tacit support. No wonder, Paras would heap praise on Nitish. Equations, however, have changed since Chirag joined the BJP camp and Nitish quit NDA in August. Given the nephew's growing proximity to the BJP, Paras has now become a bitter Nitish critic.



WAR OF WORDS

Whether in power or in opposition, politicians in the two Telugu-speaking states cannot stop disparaging each other in public. On November 18, Telangana Rashtra Samithi MLC Shambipur Raju threatened to cut BJP MP D. Arvind's tongue for speaking disrespectfully against their chief **K. Chandrashekar Rao**. The same day, Telugu Desam chief N. Chandrababu Naidu abused and threatened to beat up the protesters demanding the TDP endorse the tri-capital plan. The cheer of the festive season has left politics untouched, it seems.

SANDESH RAVIKUMAR

Kaushik Deka with Amitabh Srivastava, Ajay Sukumaran, Prashant Srivastava and Amarnath K. Menon

CHANDRA BHUSHAN

GUEST COLUMN/ COP27

FOUR BIG TAKEAWAYS FROM SHARM EL-SHEIKH

The 27th Conference of Parties (COP27) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held at Sharm El-Sheikh in Egypt, began with low expectations. But defying all presumptions, it has achieved four key outcomes that will have far-reaching implications for energy transition and international climate collaboration.

❶ **It got developed countries to agree on something they** had refused for three decades—pay for climate disasters in developing countries. Wealthy countries have always stalled any deal on Loss and Damage (L&D) because it exposes them to liability for their historic contribution to the climate crisis. They did that in Sharm El-Sheikh as well. Ultimately, under tremendous pressure from developing countries, they agreed to a new funding window for L&D, but with many caveats attached to the fund. For instance, the fund will only support countries most vulnerable to climate change (which might not include India), and funding will not only come from developed countries but from a "mosaic" of sources, which could include emerging economies and wealthy countries from the global south. Nevertheless, with the L&D deal, the framework for international climate collaboration is complete—mitigation to avert disaster, adaptation to minimise damage and L&D to compensate for losses. Of all three, it is cheapest to mitigate and most expensive to pay for L&D. This should motivate big polluters to cut emissions rather than be liable to pay billions for floods, droughts and cyclones.

Countries like China and India will now find it difficult to avoid greater responsibility for the climate crisis. They'll be under pressure to contribute more

❷ **COP27 also negotiated something that no UN climate** conference had done before: phasing out fossil fuels, the essential element to limit global warming. And it is to the credit of India that this discussion took place. Last year at Glasgow, while nations agreed to phase down coal power to limit global warming, they kept silent on oil and gas due to pressure from big oil- and gas-dependent economies. This time, India pointed out the need to phase down use of fossil fuels and got the support of nearly 80 countries, including the US, and EU nations. Unfortunately, the oil and gas phase-down was excluded from the final decision due to opposition from Saudi Arabia and Russia. Nevertheless, Sharm El-Sheikh has set in motion the process to phase out all fossil fuels, and it is a matter of time before this is accepted at a future COP.

❸ **Just transition–implementing a people-centric transition** to phase down fossil fuels—emerged as a crucial pivot to reduce emissions from fossil fuel-dependent developing countries. Mid-way through COP27, a $20 billion deal was struck between Indonesia and G7 countries at the G20 meeting in Bali to phase down coal use in Indonesia. Called Just Energy Transition Partnership (JET-P), South Africa and G7 signed a similar deal worth $8.5 billion last year. A JET-P agreement was also offered to India, which it rightly postponed for future negotiations. Taking a cue from JET-P, at COP27, parties have agreed to negotiate a possible future agreement to scale up support for just transition in other developing countries. Most likely, the future financial deal between the developed and developing countries would be through just transition partnerships.

❹ **COP27 has further diluted the traditional** classification of developed and developing countries, as outlined in the 1992 convention. The question of who should pay for L&D brought focus on China, the largest current emitter and second-largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases. The fact that China is putting billions into the Belt and Road Initiative but prefers to be called a developing country at the UNFCCC was questioned by many countries, developed and developing. The same applies to nations like Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Singapore. It is clear that from now on, countries like China will find it challenging to avoid greater responsibility for the climate crisis. There will also be pressure on India to contribute more, as it is traditionally bracketed with China at the UNFCCC. Overall, COP27 has changed the nature of international negotiations. It is crucial for the government of India to recognise these shifts and revisit its negotiating strategy to advance the nation's development and climate agenda together. ■

The writer is CEO, International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology (iFOREST)

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

नि:शुल्क इलाज
मुख्यमंत्री
चिरंजीवी
स्वास्थ्य बीमा योजना

Ashok Gehlot
Chief Minister, Rajasthan

Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme a boon for the common man

Free insurance upto Rs. 10 lakh

- Ray of Hope for people suffering from serious diseases
- Till now more than 26.85 lakh people were treated free for over Rs 3116.33 crore

Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme (Mukhyamantri Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana) is proving to be a boon for people from villages to cities of Rajasthan. Treatment from fever to serious diseases is being done free of cost in this public welfare scheme. This scheme implemented by Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has become a support to all the people of the state. The important target of the Rajasthan government is to provide health security to each family by strengthening the medical services of the state.

Kaluram Jat (26) resident of Dhamana village in Chittorgarh district got injured in a road accident and suffered serious head injuries. He was admitted to Sawai Man Singh hospital in Jaipur under Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme (Mukhyamantri Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana). After the surgery by expert doctors, he is completely healthy. Kaluram and his father Bhagwan Lal expressing gratitude to Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot said that they could not have afforded the surgery expenses. The entire treatment was free of cost in this scheme and did not face any kind of problem. This scheme is a boon for poor people of the state. Now poor people can get treatment free of cost for even serious diseases.

Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme (Mukhyamantri Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana) is helping the poor in many ways. If any person is suffering from any serious disease and is not registered in this scheme, even then free treatment is being provided on the recommendation of the district collector.

Rajasthan becomes model state in the entire country

Rajasthan has become a model state in providing health services across the country. Health has always been the top priority of Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot. He was always concerned as to how would poor people bear the expensive treatment. In such a situation, he launched Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme (Mukhyamantri Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana) on May 1, 2021. Initially, the insurance cover was Rs 5 lakh, which was increased to Rs 10 lakh in the year 2022. The main objective of this scheme was to relieve people of the state from heavy medical expenses.

Benefit of 1,633 packages and procedures

The state government has provided free treatment to more than 26.85 lakh beneficiaries. Till now, since the launch of the scheme Rs 3116.33 crore has been spent. Currently, the benefit of 1633 packages and procedures is being given. Looking at the health packages, it can be claimed that almost all serious diseases has been included in Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme.

TREATMENT OF SERIOUS DISEASES BECOMES EASY

- Serious diseases such as Cancer, Neuro, Covid, Black Fungus etc
- Dialysis included in Health Insurance Scheme
- Cochlear Implant
- Bone Marrow Transplant
- Organ Transplant (Kidney, Heart and Liver Transplant)
- Knee Replacement
- Hip Replacement

Expenses are covered for **5 days** before getting admitted to the hospital and even for **15 days** after discharge from the hospital.

Accident insurance up to Rs **5 lakh**

897 Private Hospitals have been linked to Chiranjeevi Health Scheme.

181 - Call on Toll-free number to know more about the scheme or to register a complaint.

Government to bear the expenses of more than Rs 10 lakh

The amount spent on the transplant will not be deducted from the insured amount of Rs 10 lakh. And if there is a need for more than the insured amount of Rs 10 lakh due to serious disease then the state government is bearing the additional amount through trust mode and providing free treatment to the beneficiaries so that the common man does not have any problem in treatment.

Free treatment to injured people from other states

Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot in another important initiative has also started Mukhyamantri Chiranjeevi Sadak Suraksha Yojana (Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Road Safety Scheme). In this scheme, if any person, who is from any state, gets injured in a road accident then without identity and eligibility will get free emergency treatment in private hospitals for up to 72 hours. The objective of this scheme is that the life of the injured is saved in any way because this time is considered a Golden Hour in medical science.

More than 88% of families have Health Insurance

At present more than 88% of families in Rajasthan have health insurance. Rajasthan has become the first state in the country to give health insurance to such a large number. This achievement was possible due to the Chiranjeevi health insurance scheme. The report of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) is witness to this fact. As per the report of NFHS-4, only 19% of people in the state were having health insurance.

More than 1.35 crore families got registered

The prominence given by the public to Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme is a testimony to the fact that at present more than 1.35 crore families are registered in this scheme. Of this, more than 1.07 crore families are under National Food Security Act, more than 12.91 lakh are the families of small and marginal farmers, more than 3.41 lakh are families of helpless and deserted, over 52,000 families of contractual workers working in all departments/boards/corporations/government companies and 8059 families eligible in Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) totaling to more than 1.24 crore families are getting the benefit of this scheme free of cost that is the state government bears the cost of their premium amount. The remaining of more than 10.84 lakh families have borne the premium amount of Rs 850 per annum and are taking benefit of this scheme. People can get themselves registered in this scheme by going to the nearest e-mitra and avail the benefit of this scheme.

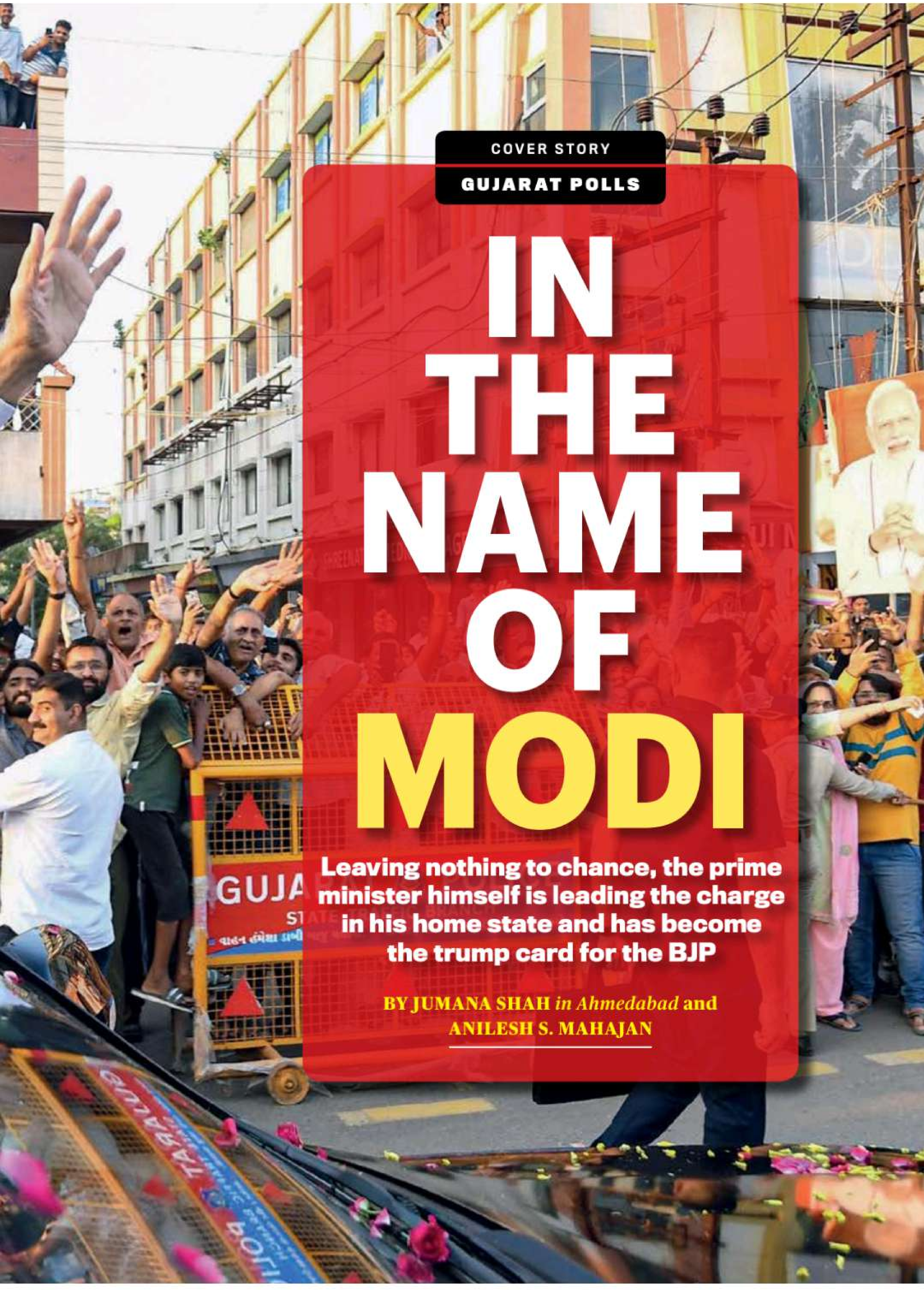
Details of super speciality services, number of beneficiaries and amount of mediclaim benefit

S.No	Super Speciality	No. of Beneficiaries	Amount spent (in crores)
1.	General Medicine	1226681	564.31
2.	Cardiology	55852	403.75
3.	Orthopaedics	213852	429.36
4.	General Surgery	165767	306.51
5.	Urology	113876	236.05
6.	Medical Oncology	143198	207.37
7.	Gynaecology & Obstetrics	192441	190.78
8.	Heart, Chest and Vascular Surgery	11313	142.37
9.	Radiation Oncology	17176	94.47
10.	Neurosurgery	17164	79.76
11.	Neonatal Care	65644	90.81
12.	Paediatric management	177695	79.83
13.	ENT	41192	58.47
14.	Surgical Oncology	10094	44.53
15.	Ophthalmology	48689	35.45
16.	Covid-19	4409	16.30
17.	Black Fungus	730	39.76
18.	Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery	4913	16.10
19	Emergency Room Package (in those cases in which stay was less than 12 hours)	136352	26.47
20.	Paediatric Surgery	6706	12.31
21.	Burn Management	2454	10.38
22.	Interventional Neuroradiology	541	5.67
23.	Mental Disorder	6348	5.11
24.	Polytrauma	11744	4.97
25.	Oral and Maxillofacial	2158	3.60
26.	Transplant surgery	101	2.63
27.	Renal Transplant	167	4.90
28.	Bone Marrow Transplant	19	0.44
29.	Cochlear Implant Packages	49	1.60
30.	Heart Transplant Packages	4	0.13
31.	Liver Transplant Packages	6	0.45
32.	DIALYSIS	400104	68.34
33.	PET CT SCAN	8142	11.39

Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme is better than Ayushman Bharat- Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana

Details	Ayushman Bharat- Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana	Chief Minister Chiranjeevi Health Insurance Scheme
Insurance Coverage	Rs 5 lakh	Rs 10 lakh
Beneficiary	Families eligible in Socio Economic Census-2011	The state government is bearing the insurance of premium of families eligible in NFSA, families eligible in Socio Economic Census-2011, contractual employees working in various departments, small and marginal farmers and families getting Covid-19 ex-gratia (more than 1.21 crore families) and apart from this, capable families by paying Rs 850 per annum can avail this scheme. A total of 1.35 crore families are linked with this scheme.
Package	1350	1633 packages and procedures are available in this scheme.
Organ Transplant	Not Available	Costly treatments like liver, heart, kidney, bone marrow transplants, cochlear implants, knee replacement and hip replacement are available free of cost.
Necessary Documents	Compulsory to have the Insurance Card	Only Jan Aadhaar is required.
Accident Insurance	Not Available	Beneficiary family has accident insurance of Rs 5 lakh.

CREATING A WAVE
PM Narendra Modi greeting people in Jamnagar, Oct. 10



COVER STORY

GUJARAT POLLS

IN THE NAME OF MODI

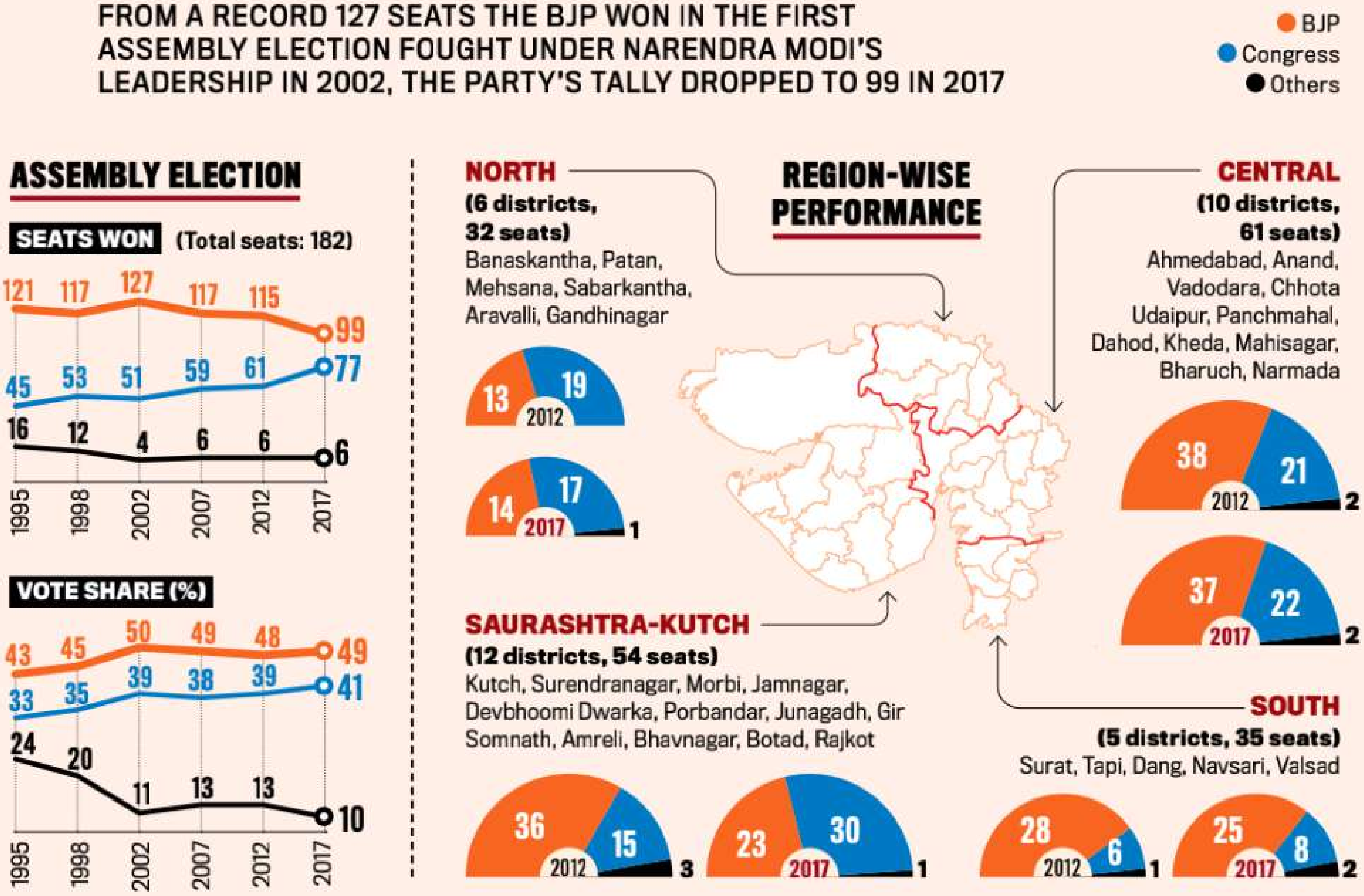
Leaving nothing to chance, the prime minister himself is leading the charge in his home state and has become the trump card for the BJP

BY JUMANA SHAH *in Ahmedabad* **and ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

They had gathered in large numbers at the venue of the election rally at Navsari, an hour's drive from its twin city, Surat. All were wearing saffron-coloured Gandhi topis that had the legend 'BJP' embossed on them; many were carrying cardboard cutouts of his face, holding them up for everyone to see. The sight and sound of his helicopter landing some distance away set off a frenzied chant from the multitude. "Modi, Modi, Modi," they screamed, the incantation reaching a deafening crescendo when he stepped on to the podium to greet them. It has been close to nine years now since Narendra Modi gave up his chief ministership to assume the mantle of the country's prime minister and yet he is greeted with the same adulation and affection as he was when he was

INDEX OF PAST PERFORMANCE

FROM A RECORD 127 SEATS THE BJP WON IN THE FIRST ASSEMBLY ELECTION FOUGHT UNDER NARENDRA MODI'S LEADERSHIP IN 2002, THE PARTY'S TALLY DROPPED TO 99 IN 2017



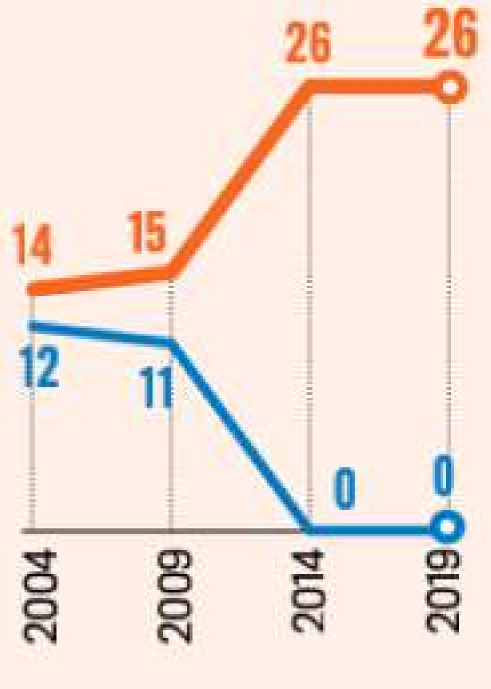
at the helm of the state for a record 12 and a half years. Modi evokes in them that rare quality called Gujarati *asmita* (pride in identity). His party has remained unbeatable in state elections since 1995; since 2002, it has flowed from this conflation of Modi with Gujarat.

Modi didn't ask the audience to repeat the BJP campaign slogan of '*Aa Gujarat, mai banavyu chhe* (I have made this Gujarat)'. But, in his address, he devoted much time to reminding people how he had ensured that the BJP governments both at the Centre and in the state had brought major development schemes to the city. Speaking in the local Gujarati dialect with intonations so nuanced that the audience listened enthralled, he went on to cite specific examples of the work done for them. He then asked them for a personal favour—to go to the homes of voters in the town and ask them to vote. "Treat this as a pilgrimage," he said, "talk of the good work done by the BJP and ask them to come out and vote on polling day. But do me a personal favour, will you? Tell them that our Narendrabhai had come to Navsari and give them my *pranaam* (regards)." The crowd went into raptures and responded in the affirmative. Encouraged, Modi continued, "Tell them it is their votes, their *aashirvad* (blessings) that will allow me to continue the good work I have been doing for the country." Meghna Amdavadi, a BJP worker who had been sitting in the front row, summed up the sentiments of all those who were present. "We regard Narendrabhai not as a father figure but as our elder brother," she said, resplendent in the party colours she is wearing, a saffron sari, cap and scarf. "He is someone with whom we can share our troubles and who constantly helps the whole family in whatever way he can. He will always get our votes."

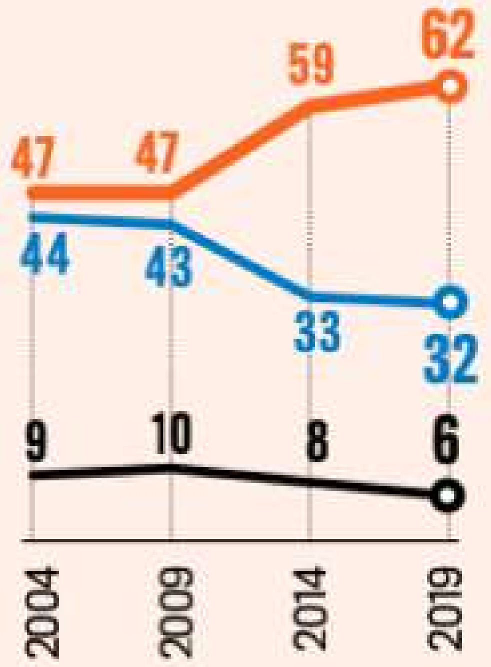
Gujarat goes to the polls in two phases—on December 1 and 5—and there is little doubt that Narendra Modi will be a decisive factor in determining the outcome of the elec-

LOK SABHA ELECTIONS

SEATS WON
(Total seats: 26)

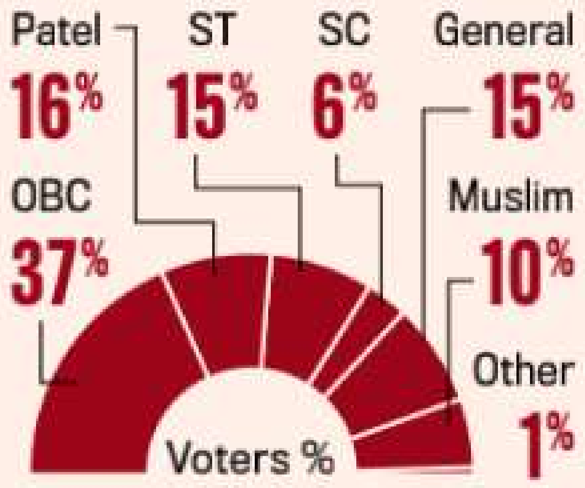


VOTE SHARE (%)



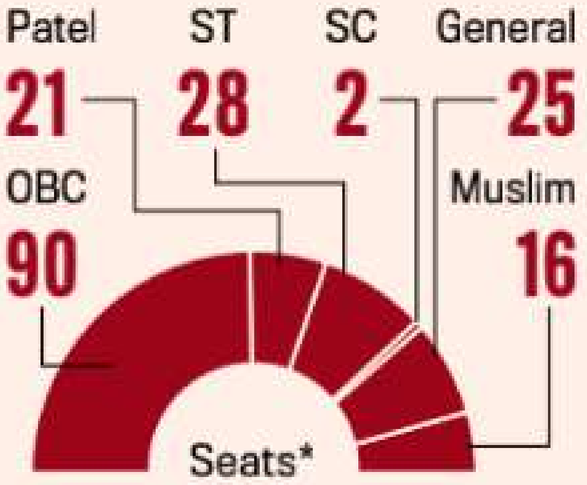
CASTE MATH

OBCs along with Patels make up the majority of Gujarat's population



CASTE POWER

OBCs can influence results in nearly half of the 182 assembly seats



**Seats with 25% or more population; Source: India Today Group-Axis My India Poll 2017*

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

IN CHARGE
Modi with Gujarat CM Bhupendra Patel at Amod, Bharuch, Oct. 10

THE BJP IS HOPING TO NOT JUST TOP ITS HIGHEST TALLY OF 127 SEATS IN 2002 BUT ALSO BEST CONGRESS RECORD OF 149 SEATS IN 1985

THE MODI ARMY

A TIGHT CLIQUE OF CONFIDANTS, INCLUDING UNION MINISTERS, GUJARAT LEADERS AND MEMBERS OF RSS AFFILIATES, IS HELPING PM NARENDRA MODI MOBILISE SUPPORT FOR THE BJP FROM ALL QUARTERS

AMIT SHAH

Union home minister

Entrusted with building BJP's fortunes in north Gujarat, fine-tune the organisational set-up across all constituencies

BHUPENDER YADAV

Union environment minister

Having proved his mettle in organisational matters, he continues to mobilise BJP cadre

BHUPENDRA PATEL

Gujarat chief minister

A genial urban Patidar, he is the CM face and the party's 'mascot' in the assembly election

HARSH SANGHAVI

Gujarat home minister

Tasked with quelling rebellion among ranks and bringing back disgruntled leaders

PARSHOTTAM RUPALA

Union fisheries minister

Actively working to strengthen party's base among OBCs and Kadva Patels in central Gujarat

PIYUSH GOYAL

Union commerce minister

Has been deployed in the state to touch base with Gujarat's business community

C.R. PATIL

Gujarat BJP president

A star campaigner and in charge of south Gujarat, he is also strategising and mobilising resources for the state unit

PRADIPSINH VAGHELA

General secretary, Gujarat BJP

In-charge of 300-odd *pravasi* teams coming in from other states to build the organisation and manage booths

MANSUKH MANDAVIYA

Union health minister

Tasked with keeping Leuva Patels from flocking towards Congress and AAP in Saurashtra

DARSHANA JARDOSH

MoS, textiles

The Surat MP and party's OBC face in Gujarat, she has been reaching out to various OBC groups in the state

RATNAKAR

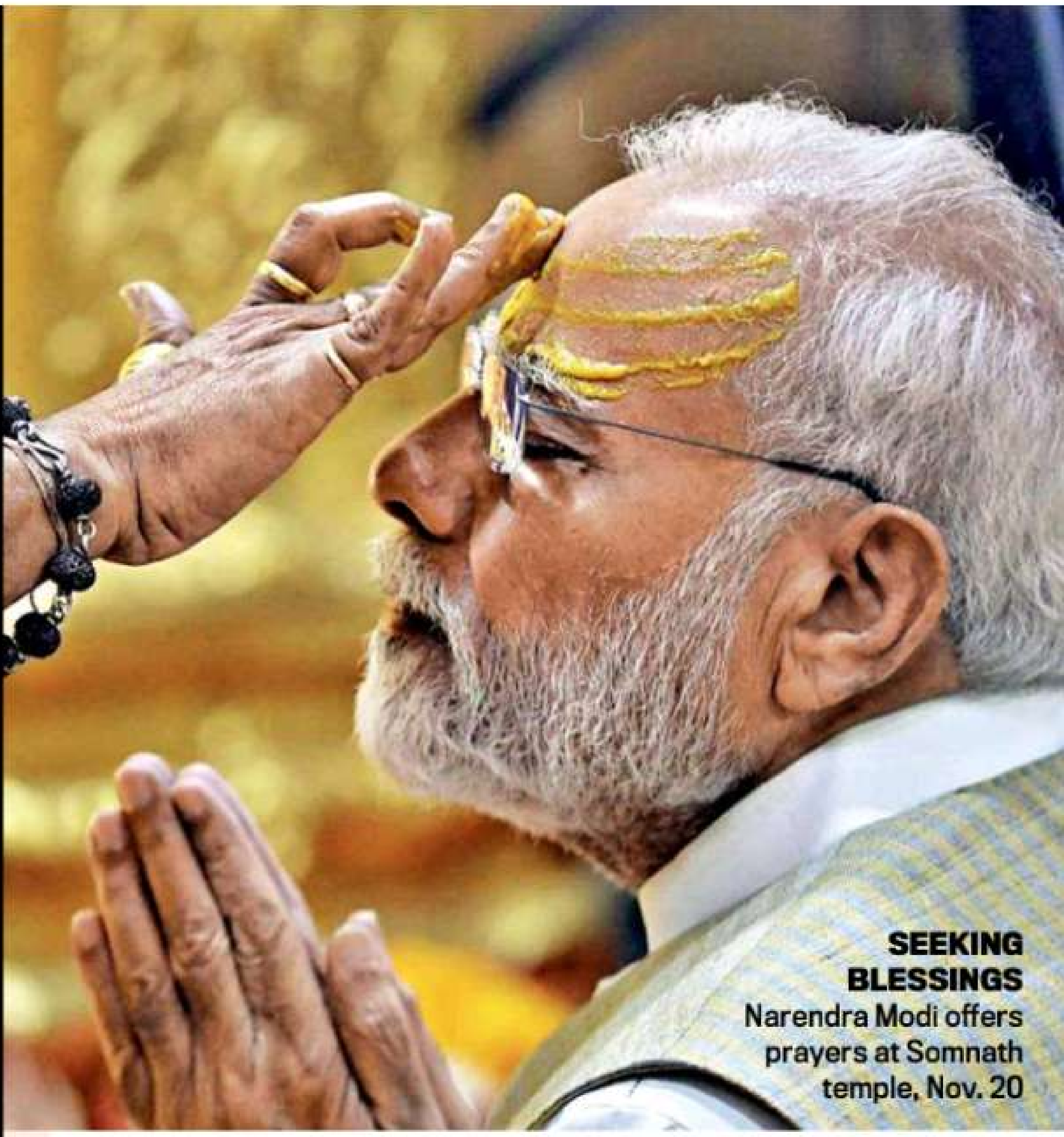
General secretary, organisation, Gujarat BJP

Micromanaging the campaign at booth level with an army of 1 million partymen covering 52,000 booths

VIJAY CHAUTHAIWALE

President, Overseas Friends of BJP

A close confidant of PM Modi and Amit Shah, he is mobilising Gujarati diaspora to campaign for the BJP



SEEKING BLESSINGS
Narendra Modi offers prayers at Somnath temple, Nov. 20

ANI

GUJARAT IS THE REASON FOR MODI'S PHENOMENAL AND HISTORIC RISE TO THE TOP. HE HAS TO WIN IT, AND WIN IT BIG

tion for the BJP; he remains the party's trump card. With the BJP in power in Gujarat for a quarter of a century, the party's biggest threat is anti-incumbency, and it is working doubly hard to protect its turf. But, as political analyst Ghanshyam Shah points out, "Getting voter connect with the Gujarati *asmita* and *vikaas* (development) planks is receiving lukewarm response. The only factor that seems to still hold strong is Modi's charisma, which will enable the BJP to win the election again." It will truly be remarkable, because even in 2017 when the Congress mounted a formidable challenge, the party managed to win, primarily because of Modi, even though by a reduced majority.

For years, the Congress has remained the BJP's primary challenger in the state. Even before, elections here had always been a bipolar contest. This time, however, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) headed by Arvind Kejriwal has been gaining traction. This means that for the first time, the polls are expected to be a triangular contest on most seats. Opinion polls conducted by Lokniti-CSDS in October and CVoter this month indicate that AAP is substantially cutting into the Congress vote share rather than that of the BJP. In 2017, the BJP had cornered 49.1 per cent of the vote share and the

THE BLITZKRIEG

20
Days PM Narendra Modi has spent in Gujarat since March

8
Days Modi is devoting to campaigning, addressing 3-4 rallies daily

16
Days Amit Shah spent in Gujarat in Sept.-Oct. prepping for elections

50
Rallies addressed by Shah after the poll date announcement

40
The number of star campaigners the BJP has deployed across Gujarat

AMIT THAKER

Former president, BJYM

A former student and youth wing leader, he is anchoring the campaign in 14 tribal-dominated districts

ATUL LIMAYE

RSS kshetra pracharak (paschim)

With constituency-wise RSS network, anchors the affiliates' outreach among tribals and Dalits

SIDDHARTH PATEL

Convenor, social media, Gujarat BJP

Driving the online campaign across 15 platforms with an army of 20,000 workers and 60,000 volunteers

WHO ARE THE STAR CAMPAIGNERS?

- Besides Shah, Rupala and Mandaviya, their cabinet collegaues Rajnath Singh and Nitin Gadkari are also drumming up support for the party's candidates
- BJP president J.P. Nadda is spending around 10 days in the state, addressing 40-odd rallies
- Chief Ministers Yogi Adityanath (UP), M.L. Khattar (Haryana), Himanta Biswa Sarma (Assam), Shivraj Singh Chouhan (MP), Jairam Thakur (HP), Pramod Sawant (Goa) and Maharashtra deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis are also pitching in

Text by **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

Congress 41.4 per cent. Both polls show AAP emerging as a third force and likely to garner between 20 and 25 per cent of the votes. Most, however, will be drawn from the Congress's vote share, which is expected to drop drastically to around 25 per cent. The BJP's vote share will dip too, but not by much and is expected to stay above 45 per cent.

Pollsters, therefore, predict that the triangular contest may result in a decisive win for the BJP as the opposition vote will be divided in most constituencies. That's what gives Union minister Piyush Goyal, who has campaigned extensively on the ground for the BJP, the confidence to tell INDIA TODAY, "Mark my words, we will register a historic win in the state that will break all our previous records." He refuses to give a number though, saying things will be clearer only after the second phase of the campaign gets under way. The CVoter poll gives the BJP 131-139 out of a total of 182 seats, a significant increase from the 99 seats the party won in 2017. The Congress tally is expected to drop by half—from 77 seats in 2017 to 31-39 now. AAP is expected to make its debut with 7-15 seats. The BJP, however, is hoping to not just top its highest ever tally of 127 seats in 2002 but also best the record set by the Congress, which won 149 seats in 1985, under the leadership of Madhavsinh Solanki.

THE MODI BLITZKRIEG

Despite the encouraging predictions, Modi is not leaving anything to chance. He has been on a campaign blitzkrieg since the election was announced on November 3, holding rallies and roadshows almost every day across the length and breadth of Gujarat. For Modi, the Gujarat election is not just a battle for prestige, the outcome could also play a pivotal role in helping build momentum for the 2024 general election where he is hoping to secure a third term and become only the second prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru to win back-to-back mandates thrice at the Centre. If BJP fortunes have in the past eight years seen a big uptick, it is because voters have regarded him as a strong and decisive leader who is pro-Hindutva but also pro-development and who has adopted a reforms-oriented approach towards governance. Gujarat was his laboratory before he moved to the Centre and the reason for his phenomenal and historic rise to the top. So, Modi not only needs to win Gujarat, but win it big.

The prime minister knows the imperatives and has been preparing for the Gujarat election long before others in his own party and in the rival ones got started. Having crafted a poll strategy along with Union home minister Amit Shah, he has been micro-managing it himself. He and his team identified five major issues that could mar the BJP's prospects, according to insiders. Topmost on the list was anti-incumbency and the undercurrent of resentment growing among some sections in recent years. The second was price

MODI'S 10-POINT GAME PLAN TO WIN GUJARAT

FROM A COMPLETE OVERHAUL OF THE GUJARAT CABINET WELL AHEAD OF THE POLLS ELECTION TO MICRO-MANAGING THE CAMPAIGN IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, THE PM IS PERSONALLY OVERSEEING EVERY ASPECT OF THE POLLS

1. POLITICAL REVAMP

Seen as a passive leader, then CM **Vijay Rupani** along with his entire cabinet was sacked overnight in Sept. 2021. After the poor show in 2017 and resentment among Patels, the BJP wanted to fight the 2022 polls with a Patidar face

2. DEFANG CONGRESS

The BJP has fielded 17 Congress turncoats. The loss of tall community leaders—Kunvarji Bavaliya (Koli), **Hardik Patel** (Patidar), Jawahar Chavda and Alpesh Thakor (OBC)—has left the Grand Old Party shaken

AAP IS LIKELY TO CUT MORE INTO THE CONGRESS VOTE SHARE THAN BJP'S IN THIS UNPRECEDENTED TRIANGULAR CONTEST

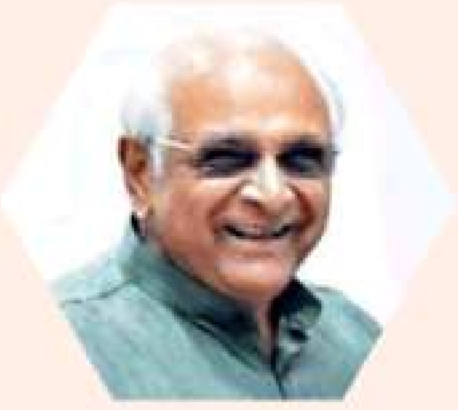
3. JOBS PUSH

Big-ticket projects such as Vedanta-Foxconn semiconductor plant and Tata-Airbus aircraft manufacturing unit have landed in the state. With its Atmanirbhar Gujarat push, the BJP has promised to create 1.5 million jobs

4. COOPERATIVE CAPTURE

The BJP wants to leverage its increasing control over cooperatives. Union home minister **Amit Shah** was given the charge of the new cooperation ministry in July 2021 as part of this strategy

5. WOO THE PATIDARS



Bhupendra Patel is the CM face, and 25% BJP candidates are Patidars. After Hardik Patel's crossover, the apex court's stamp on EWS quota—the genesis of which lies in the 2015 Patidar movement—has given the BJP a boost

6. THE HINDUTVA BACKDROP

The remission of sentence and hero's welcome given to the 11 men convicted in a 2002 gang-rape and murder case has brought the BJP's Hindutva agenda back to the centre stage, apparently to retain the loyalty of a section of voters

7. VINDICATION IN RIOTS CASE

The Supreme Court's decision upholding the clean chit to Modi in the **2002 Gujarat riots** has bolstered the BJP's narrative that the then CM was a victim, and not the perpetrator, of a conspiracy

8. CAMPAIGNER -IN-CHIEF

In five visits to the state since Aug., thrice in Oct. alone, the PM announced projects and schemes worth Rs 79,000 cr. before the model code was imposed. With Amit Shah, he is micromanaging the BJP's election campaign too

9. COUNTER AAP SOPS

Facing anti-incumbency, the BJP is projecting its 27-year rule as a sign of electorate's trust in it while branding challengers like Kejriwal 'untrustworthy' and his party's promise of freebies as '*revdis*'

10. INVOKE GUJARATI PRIDE

With the slogan *'Aa Gujarat Mai Banavyu Chhe'* ('I have made this Gujarat'), Modi has masterfully invoked Gujarati *asmita*—an old political ploy in the state—while linking himself with this pride in identity

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rise and unemployment, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and an underperforming national economy. The third was to defang and neutralise the Congress, which had surprised the BJP with its spirited campaign in 2017 that saw it secure 77 seats, the highest ever since the BJP came to power in 1995. The fourth was the need to meet the aspirations of the various caste groups and assuage any feelings of neglect or bias, particularly among the Patidars, whose revolt in 2017 against the BJP gave wind to the Congress sails. The fifth was the rising challenge posed by AAP and its convenor Kejriwal, particularly its brand of what Modi labelled the '*revdi* culture' of doling out enormous amounts of freebies to woo voters. The AAP challenge could prove a double-edged sword. By splitting the Opposition vote, it could help the BJP garner a greater number of seats. But it could also emerge as a significant force in the process and become a true contender for power by the subsequent state elections in 2027.

For the election this year, Modi set the wheels of the BJP's grand strategy to retain Gujarat into motion way back in July 2021. The first step was to use a Union cabinet rejig to woo the OBC (Other Backward Classes) voters in the state, who at 37 per cent form the largest chunk of the state's population and influence the outcome in 90 seats. So, OBC leaders Devusinh Chauhan from Anand district in central Gujarat, Darshana Jardosh from Surat and Dr Mahendra Munjpara from Surendranagar in Saurashtra were inducted into the Union cabinet. The BJP had fared poorly in Anand and Surendranagar districts in 2017, winning only two out of seven seats and one out of five seats, respectively.

Two months later, in September 2021, the then chief minister Vijay Rupani and his cabinet were booted out in a bid to bolster the BJP's caste calculus and shed anti-incumbency concerns. Rupani was replaced by Bhupendra Patel, who had never held a ministerial post before but had built his reputation as a municipal councillor in Ahmedabad. More importantly, he was a Patidar, which sent a powerful signal to disgruntled elements in the community who had revolted against the party in 2017. Modi has maintained that Patel will be retained as CM if the BJP wins. The party is expecting a massive swing of votes in its favour from this caste group, which accounts for 16 per cent of the population and can influence the outcome in 20-30 seats.

Simultaneously, the BJP put its sitting MLAs through a process of sifting. Forty-two of them have been denied renominations, including several powerful stalwarts like Rupani and his ministerial heavyweights like Nitin Patel, Pradeepsinh Jadeja and Bhupendrasinh Chudasama. This has caused significant heartburn among those who have been dropped, with open protests in 49 seats. Some have even rebelled and are contesting as Independents against the party, forcing the BJP to expel 12 leaders for doing so. The uprising has largely been quelled for now, with the promise of plum postings in corporations or PSUs for those left out of the fray. In several cases, the party had made the contesting candidate conduct a campaign with the seat veteran who has been retired, to accord respect to the outgoing leaders and pacify their supporters.

DEFANGING THE CONGRESS

The party has been equally decisive in its moves to bleed the Congress. Much of the steam for the latter's impressive performance in 2017 was derived from the Patidar reservation movement spearheaded by Hardik Patel, who had caught the imagination of the youth. The discontent dovetailed into the prevailing anti-incumbency sentiment, costing the BJP as much as 30 per cent of the Patel vote. After the election, the Congress had made Hardik Patel working president of the state unit, only to have him soon champing at the bit at the desultory way the party was going about its election campaign. Risking the wrath of its cadres, the BJP won over Hardik Patel by getting him to join the party and then practically neutralised his influence by limiting his campaigning to a handful of seats around his hometown Viramgam, also the seat he is contesting from. Simultaneously, the BJP began targeting other Congress MLAs and luring them to its fold. Out of around the four dozen Congress leaders who have defected to the saffron camp, the BJP has fielded 17, risking dissidence in its own ranks. Among them is Alpesh Thakor, who played a prominent role for the Congress in wooing the OBCs in 2017. The Patidar Anamat Aandolan Samiti, the body under which the Patel youth were rallying for reservation in 2015, is practically defunct, though not officially wound up.

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THE CONGRESS STRATEGY REMAINS AN ENIGMA. DESPITE WINNING 77 SEATS IN 2017, IT HAS DONE LITTLE TO BECOME A FORMIDABLE OPPOSITION IN THE STATE

The Congress tried to hit back by wooing Naresh Patel, a businessman and founder trustee of the powerful Shree Khodaldham Temple Trust (SKTT) headquartered in Rajkot. The Leuva Patels, who constitute 80 per cent of the Patidar community, owe allegiance to the Khodaldam deity, and the temple has emerged as a powerful political axis. In January, Naresh Patel announced his desire to

THE CHALLENGERS
AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal at Gandhidham on Nov. 5, (left) Congress leader Rahul Gandhi campaigning in Surat on Nov. 21

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finally enter politics and almost joined Congress, according to sources. Except that he did not, claiming that "the time is not right". Curiously, that announcement came right after he reportedly met Modi. Meanwhile, the BJP fielded the second-most powerful member of the SKTT, Ramesh Tilara, from the Rajkot (South) seat, much against the wishes of former BJP minister Govind Patel, who had won the seat comfortably in the previous election.

The Congress strategy in Gujarat, meanwhile, remains an enigma. Despite winning 77 seats in 2017, it failed to become a formidable opposition either in the assembly proceedings or in subsequent local polls, betraying the trust of its support base. Instead, it ceded ground to AAP rather lamely and allowed it to win 27 of the 120 seats in the Surat municipal polls. Strategy for the assembly polls this time has again been left to Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot, who played a significant role in the Congress's impressive showing in 2017.

Unlike the previous election when Rahul Gandhi led from the front and campaigned extensively in the state, he has preferred to continue with his Bharat Jodo Yatra, which inexplicably did not include Gujarat. He finally agreed to address two rallies, one at Anaval near Surat and the other at Rajkot. At Anaval, a town dominated by tribals, support for the Congress was evident from the crowds that had gathered to hear Rahul. But the Congress leader spent most of the time talking about the aims of his yatra and less on addressing key tribal issues. The Congress scion also does not have the advantage of being able to speak in Gujarati, and establish a natural connect that Modi can. It was when Rahul addressed tribal apprehensions over the possible takeover of their land for the Par-Tapi-Narmada river-linking project that he elicited the most cheers. The reason why the tribals resist the BJP is their apprehension that the party wants to take over their *jal*, *jangal* and *jameen* (water, forests and land) in the name of urban development and hand it over to corporates to exploit. In 2017, the BJP won just nine out of the 27 seats reserved for tribals, with the Congress bagging the most, 15, and the rest going to other parties.

This time, the BJP has assured tribals that the river-linking project has been put on hold. Modi also makes it a point to mention how his government has acknowledged the contribution of Adivasi icon Birsa Munda. Meanwhile, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) affiliate Janjati Kalyan Ashram, has stepped up its activities in the 14 tribal districts of the state. However, poll experts believe the tribals are likely to continue backing the Congress this election. The RSS, which has 1,334 daily *shakhas* at taluka level, is also making constant efforts to reach out to Dalit communities in villages via their *samrast gaon* (synergised villages) programme. In the past year, *samrast yajnas* have been held in 1,000 villages, where all communities come together to pray. The RSS is also using this outreach to push for *ek gaon, ek kuan, ek shamshan* (one village, one well and one crematorium).

However, despite the Congress campaign remaining relatively low-key, the BJP fears it is working silently at the grassroots level, something Modi has been warning of in his speeches. Another BJP leader says the Congress is working on the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) formula perfected by Solanki to win his record mandate. The BJP also has to contend with a rising AAP. Though top BJP leaders dismiss its campaign as just bluster, partymen do concede that AAP is beginning to make inroads into the state. Especially after Kejriwal announced a spate of freebies, including free water and electricity supply to farmers, Rs 3,000 to every unemployed youth till they get jobs, besides free healthcare and education. And though the prime minister called out the '*revdi* culture' in August without naming AAP, in his five visits to Gujarat between then and the imposition of the model code of conduct on November 3, he inaugurated or announced a bonanza of infrastructural projects, social welfare schemes and other sops, which total Rs 79,000 crore, for the state. Then, there's the Atmanirbhar Gujarat scheme to boost capital and power subsidies to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). For the powerful cooperatives in the state, the Centre reformulated a policy so that tax liability of Rs 8,000 crore could be waived for the state's 1.5-2 million sugar cultivators. Meanwhile, to address unemployment in the state, the BJP government been tom-tomming a big push for industry. This includes the announcement that the Vedanta-Foxconn semiconductor plant was coming up in Dholera and a Tata-Airbus manufacturing unit in Vadodara. In October, Modi inaugurated India's first bulk drug manufacturing plant in Bharuch. All these initiatives find mention in the campaign speeches to demonstrate that the government is creating a number of jobs in the state.

WHETHER IN THE DIGITAL REALM OR AT THE RALLIES AND IN THE DOOR-TO-DOOR CAMPAIGNS—THE CENTRAL THEME REMAINS THE SAME: IT'S MODI VS THE REST. THE PM CONTINUES TO BE THE TALISMAN THAT THE BJP HOPES WILL HELP IT WIN

STRATEGY IN MOTION

Despite the tide being in the BJP's favour, Modi & Co are leaving nothing to chance and pulling out all the stops to woo voters. In addition to massive rallies, the prime minister is also planning door-to-door campaigning. Bharat Pandya, a former MLA and Modi's greenroom boy, told INDIA TODAY, "We believe in three Vs for victory—*vichaar* (ideology), *vatavaran* (environment) and *vyavastha* (organisation)." Modi, with his run of rallies, has lent a touch of electricity to the environment that has energised the party's well-oiled election machinery, with 1.04 million *panna pramukhs* and 1.09 million cadre manning all 52,000 booths across the state. The party has also activated its *pravasi* (outstation) leaders to beef up the organisational teams. They have been asked to anchor outreach programmes, man Shakti Kendras as well as devise and execute booth-level activities while mobilising resources on the ground. Around 150 senior party leaders, Union ministers, chief ministers and leaders from other states have been roped in for the 'carpet-bombing campaign'. There is also an outreach programme to woo the large diaspora with the BJP's overseas wing persuading them to back party candidates in their respective spheres of influence. The BJP strategy of deploying *panna samitis* (voter page committees), which paid handsome dividends in Uttar Pradesh, is also being used in Gujarat.

Meanwhile, the party has set up digital war rooms across the state. Lined with desktops, they have dozens of young people poring over their screens, while multiple television sets hooked on the walls play regional or even a few national news channels. Eyeballs and fingers are constantly moving, as these youth work round the clock, keeping in direct touch with voters virtually and controlling the narrative in the digital space. The BJP has a strict standardised creative language that every candidate has to follow. Social media handles of all candidates are centrally controlled to maintain uniformity. The candidate is expected to focus on campaigning while the central team manages the outreach. Programmed ads play ceaselessly. BJP sources say they put out more than 100,000 WhatsApp groups to amplify the party's message. The party's central digital media management team also provides candidates with videographers and photographers to facilitate real-time updates on social media. Sources indicate that a candidate spends a minimum of 10-15 per cent of his total poll expenditure on digital presence.

But whether in the digital realm or at the rallies and in the door-to-door campaigns—the central theme remains the same: it's Modi vs the Rest. The prime minister continues to be the talisman that the BJP hopes will help it win. Hence, everything that is being done in the Gujarat campaign is being done in the name of Modi. ■

WHY EVERYONE WANTS TO OWN BIRSA MUNDA

AN ENIGMATIC TRIBAL ICON FROM THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY SUDDENLY BECOMES THE TOAST OF ALL POLITICAL PARTIES. WHY? BECAUSE ADIVASI VOTES ARE CRUCIAL IN A SPATE OF UPCOMING ELECTIONS

By Romita Datta

ICON WORSHIP
PM Narendra Modi pays tribute to Birsa Munda at Parliament House

Photographs by ANI

LAND, FOREST, IDENTITY, FAITH: the themes that relate to India's tribal communities seem as ancient and unchanged as the jungles of Chhotanagpur where, on a monsoon-soaked night in 1895, a 21-year-old youth named Birsa Munda experienced an epiphany. It was the onset of a remarkable story; an inflection point in Adivasi history. The one change that came with electoral democracy is that identity is now also *political*—in the party politics sense. For a man who's a totemic figure of rebellion for Adivasis—indeed, of armed resistance to exploitation by all outsiders—it's ironic how every party is scrambling for a piece of Birsa.

The tribal icon, as he was in real life, is perhaps too complex a figure to allow for easy cooption by any party. But he is also a metaphor—an emotional bridge to a vast populace. So we see him now as the centrepiece of the BJP's outreach to India's tribals, the same segment whose disaffection Rahul Gandhi was seen tapping into in his poll campaign detour to Surat, Gujarat, amid the Bharat Jodo Yatra. If in Jharkhand, Chief Minister Hemant Soren is only paying obesiance to a figure sacred to his people, West Bengal's Mamata Banerjee is seeking to fill a void she had left after the halcyon days of the Nandigram agitation in that state's Jangalmahal tribal belt.

Arguably, among them, the largest distance has to be covered by the BJP. It was in the name of Ram that it wrung out political dividends in the Hindi heartland. From there to campaigning in the name of Birsa—who had started his own religion, mixing

elements of Christian messianism and Vaishnav purity with the ancient tribal religion of Sarnaism—is a giant tactical leap. The party is guided by sound logic, though. When it tried its aggressive Ram mandir plank in other parts of 'mainstream' India—say, in Bengal and Odisha, where Durga, Kali and Jagannath are the presiding deities—the return on investment didn't entirely match up. The Adivasi world is at an even further remove.

Lessons learnt, it's going for embracing popular beliefs, cultures and icons. Here's where its newfound love for Birsa, the heroic freedom fighter seen as Bhagwan (God) or Dharti Aba (Father of the Earth) by his people, fits in. The turn was visible in 2021, when the Modi government declared November 15, Birsa's birth anniversary, as Janjaatiya Gaurav Divas, or Tribal Pride Day. This year is his 147th birth anniversary, three years still to go for the sesquicentennial. Yet the Modi government found the occasion worthy enough to merit a grand country-wide celebration.

The reason is not hard to guess. Assembly elections are due next year in nine states with sizeable tribal populations: Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana, Karnataka, besides Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram. Last time, of these states, the BJP had won only Tripura on its own strength, and only piggybacked its way to power via popular regional parties in Nagaland and Meghalaya. It could not retain Chhattisgarh, which it had won thrice consecutively, or Birsa's homeland Jharkhand in 2019—losing out just months after the spectacular general election win.

The chief reason was tribal disenchantment. In Jharkhand, while the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha-Rashtriya Janata Dal-Congress alliance secured 25 out of 28 reserved tribal seats in an assembly of 81, the BJP got only two. That trend had already been visible by 2017, with the Congress winning 25 of 29 reserved tribal seats in Chhattisgarh; the BJP got only three. In neighbouring MP, as the BJP lost to the Congress by two seats in a cliffhanger, the tribal vote was again decisive: the BJP got only 15 out of 47 reserved seats for tribals; 30 seats went to the Congress. In all, the BJP had lost 120 of the 180 seats reserved for SC/STs in the 2018 assembly polls in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The spinning of a new narrative to win back the tribals, then, comes as no surprise.

WHY BIRSA?

Birsa Munda, born in 1875 in Khunti district of today's Jharkhand, is a complex figure who combines the personas of prophet and revolutionary. Described as a young man with "remarkably attractive features...a face intelligent and smiling, pensive and thoughtful", he had a spiritual-political trajectory that may not be an automatic fit for Hindutva. First converted to Christianity by the German Mission School as Birsa David, then briefly the Catholic church, he reverted to his native faith Sarnaism once he saw conversions as a colonial ploy. But he brought back to it strong Biblical elements: revelation, doomsday, resurrection, miracle healing...and most of all, monotheism. The Munda, Oraon and Kharia communities began to see in him a god-like figure, a redeemer of their woes, and flocked to him to be cured of ailments. But the decisive turn came when he lent his messianic aura to armed rebellion. Present-day Jharkhand and contiguous regions in east India had seen a series of revolts through the 19th century against both the colonial British as well as native *dikus* (outsiders), a new money-lending class that brought the tribals under the yoke as bondsmen through usurious land rent and other means of exploitation. The Birsaite revolt was short-lived but spectacular, and granted the tribals a talisman for all times—they believe his spirit still roams free in the forests.

Modern corporates may often answer to the description of *diku* in tribal eyes, but politics finds ingenious ways around that gap. Alliances and cooption are the first tool mainstream

CELEBRATING BIRSA West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee at the icon's birth anniversary celebration in Jhargram, Nov. 15; Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren in Ranchi

parties deploy. Then comes symbolism—or tokenism, as critics would say. After Jharkhand in 2019, the BJP erred just once more—in Bengal, 2021. Fighting with the Jai Shri Ram chanting brigade as the vanguard, the party lost as many as 10 assembly seats in the tribal belt of Bankura, Purulia, West Midnapore and Jhargram.

THE BJP HOLDS ONLY 20 OUT OF 104 SEATS RESERVED FOR TRIBALS IN THE PRESENT JHARKHAND, CHHATTISGARH AND MADHYA PRADESH ASSEMBLIES

It realised that if tribals had to be wooed and won, it has to be on their terms and by espousing their culture and philosophy. The course correction came soon. To those like Hemant Soren, who saw identity politics when Modi made the Tribal Pride Day announcement last November, he had his alibi ready: the 75th year of Indian Independence was an occasion to honour our tribal freedom fighters, who had mostly slipped into oblivion. Union tribal affairs minister Arjun Munda said it was the first time such unsung heroes were getting their due honour. Acknowledging the achievements of 200-odd tribals—artists, sportspeople et al—was part of the statement being made. The ultimate bit of symbolism came when the Modi regime put Droupadi Murmu in Rashtrapati Bhavan—the journey of a shy Adivasi girl from the backward parts of Odisha to India's topmost post was offered as an inspirational tale for everyone in India's tribal communities.

"This celebrates tribal lives and acknowledges the hardships they face to make a mark in society. Inaugurating Birsa statues is a way of paying fleeting respect, bringing oppressed people from the margins to the mainstream is perhaps a more sustainable way of honouring them," says social scientist Prasanta Ray. For now, though, it's all about according tribal heroes that moment in the sun. In keeping with electoral exigencies, there's been a surge of that of late. In July, Modi inaugurated a 30-foot bronze statue of freedom fighter Alluri Sitarama Raju in West Godavari in Andhra Pradesh. Raju, though from the Kshatriya caste, fought the British like Birsa, mobilising oppressed tribals in the famous Rampa Rebellion of the 1920s, and laying down his life at age 27.

The BJP is hardly alone in its adulatory overdrive. Leaders of all stripes are basking in the air of Birsa resurrection. Soren had begun a year ago, spending Rs 35 crore to build a Birsa museum, oddly choosing to echo the structure of the infamous Cellular Jail in the Andamans. A 30-foot statue followed, so did a Birsa Memorial Park and 10 statues of other tribal martyrs.

Neighbouring Bengal too is overflowing with Birsa devotion. Mamata inaugurated a statue in Belpahari, Jhargram, and had a 16-ft fibreglass Birsa unveiled virtually in Bankura, on November 15—the second in the vicinity of an anonymous tribal hunter's statue that Union home minister Amit Shah had erroneously garlanded in 2020. While the state BJP held rallies, the CM was seen matching steps with Adivasi women to the beats of drums and timbrels. It might as well have been a quasi-official poll notification: rural body elections are due early 2023. Besides the tribal vote that will be key all over the western and northern belt, it helps thwart a relapse into Maoism.

VOTE FOR DHAMSA MADOL

Madhya Pradesh, even after the demarcation of Chhattisgarh, has a sizeable 21 per cent tribal population. It's not for nothing that CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan too is going around drumming up support, quite literally, with the Adivasi dhamsa-madol. Having burnt his fingers with a tribal backlash in 2018, he's leaving nothing to chance. So President Murmu was at hand on November 15 in Shahdol to launch a big ticket pro-tribal policy—formulation of rules for implementing PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas). Ironically, the rules are being drawn 26 years *after* the PESA Act—largely because neither the BJP nor the Congress wanted to antagonise the OBC votebank. But times have changed.

Birsa had once prophesied his own resurrection, but it's coming true in unpredicted ways. The BJP, which holds 31 of total 47 Lok Sabha seats reserved for tribals, as columnist Mohit Ray points out, wants to thwart any attrition as its rivals home in on the same turf. Sadly, the status quo is too resilient on one front—"The leaders amass wealth, the tribals stay neglected." ■

INDIA'S NEW SPACE WARRIORS

THE SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH OF A ROCKET BUILT BY A START-UP RUN BY TWO YOUNG EX-IITIANs IS THE FORERUNNER TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR BECOMING A MAJOR PLAYER IN THE COUNTRY'S SPACE AMBITIONS

BY RAJ CHENGAPPA

VITAL STATS OF VIKRAM-S

MASS	**545 KG**
LENGTH	**6 M**
DIAMETER	**0.375 M**
PEAK THRUST	**7 TONNES**
PEAK VELOCITY	**> MACH 5**
PAYLOAD	**83 KG**
ALTITUDE	**89.5 KM**

REACHING FOR THE SKIES
Vikram-S lifts off at the ISRO launch centre in Sriharikota, Nov. 18

Pawan Chandana looked tense as he sat glued to the computer monitor at the mission control room waiting for the countdown for the launch of the Vikram-S rocket to end on November 18. Next to him sat the reticent Bharat Daka, his partner in founding Skyroot, a start-up venture they set up in 2018 to build spacecraft. Behind them in the visitor's gallery was seated a galaxy of distinguished space scientists, including S. Somanath, chairperson of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). That Jitendra Singh, the Union minister of state for space and atomic energy, was present too was evidence of the importance of the mission called Prarambh, or the beginning. Indeed, Vikram-S was to be the first launch vehicle for spacecraft entirely designed and built by an Indian private company and whose success was expected to mark a giant leap for the country's private sector into space.

Outside, it was a balmy day at the ISRO launch centre in Sriharikota in coastal Andhra Pradesh. The six-metre-tall deep blue and white Vikram-S strapped to steel girders for the launch looked small compared to the giant launch vehicles that ISRO builds. But given the complexities of space technology, it was a huge challenge for a start-up. Chandana and Daka, both in their early 30s, were up for it. Both ex-IITians—Chandana from Kharagpur and Daka from Madras—they had chosen to join ISRO in 2012 rather than go abroad after graduation. Having worked in rocketry and other space activities sections at ISRO for six years, they decided to set up Skyroot as a private venture.

In doing so, they drew inspiration from the likes of billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk of Tesla whose company Space X has built rockets to launch satellites and even astronauts for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the US government space agency. Then there was Jeff Bezos, another billionaire and owner of Amazon, who set up Blue Origin, and Richard Branson, owner of Virgin Airlines, who formed Virgin Galactic. In addition to doing what Musk does at SpaceX, both Bezos and Branson also pioneered space tourism to enable wealthy civilians to get a taste of orbiting in space and experience zero gravity or weightlessness for a payment.

When Chandana and Daka set out to build rockets four years ago, they thought government policy would be their biggest hurdle. Ever since ISRO was formed in 1969, the government had given it the monopoly over all space activity in the country. ISRO surprisingly did the job well and has a record of achievements few public sector institutions in India can rival. It propelled India into the small but exclusive club of space-faring nations who can build sophisticated heavy-lift rockets and launch a range of complex satellites designed for remote sensing, weather forecasting, telecommunications and military applications. ISRO has also conducted space exploration missions, sending probes, orbiters and landers to the Moon and Mars. To its credit, ISRO had also started steadily outsourcing the building of its launch vehicles and satellite systems to private players. As a result, both private and public sector companies now provide over 50 per cent of the country's rocket and satellite systems.

However, while ISRO made India self-reliant in much of space technology, its stranglehold over all space activity in the country had begun to choke growth. Internationally, the space sector, including building rockets and satellites, has grown to a lucrative $440 billion. But India accounts for just $8 billion, or less than two per cent, of it. To become a global space power, India needs humongous amounts of money, which the government, given the budget constraints, has found difficult to provide. They, therefore, decided to enlist the private sector in a big way, as is the case in developed countries, and provide incentive for both investment and entrepreneurship to flourish.

In May 2020, in the middle of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced bold reforms in

A GROWING ARMY

FIVE OF THE 100-ODD PRIVATE START-UPs COMPETING FOR INDIA'S SPACE SECTOR

SKYROOT AEROSPACE

FOUNDED: 2018; FOUNDERS: Pawan Chandana, Bharath Daka

Skyroot provides launch services for small satellites. It successfully tested its first launcher Vikram-S on November 18; as of 2022, it has completed full ground tests of its first rocket, Vikram I. Two heavier rockets—Vikram II and Vikram III—are currently in development.

AGNIKUL COSMOS

FOUNDED: 2017; FOUNDERS: Srinath Ravichandran, Moin S.P.M.

Developing and testing its spacefaring technology since 2018, AgniKul successfully developed a single-piece fully 3D printed upper stage engine in 2019. Its first launcher is expected to be tested in December.

DHRUVA SPACE

FOUNDED: 2012; FOUNDERS: Sanjay Nekkanti, Krishna Teja Penamakuru, Abhay Egoor, Chaitanya Dora Surapureddy

The firm was established to lead the privatisation of the satellite industry in India. It says it is developing an indigenous small satellite platform with a focus on assembly, integration, testing and operation of satellites.

PIXXEL

FOUNDED: 2019; FOUNDERS: Awais Ahmed, Kshitij Khandelwal

The firm describes itself as a space data company, building a stable of hyper-spectral Earth-imaging satellites and the analytical tools needed to mine insights from the data they gather.

BELLATRIX AEROSPACE

FOUNDED: 2015; FOUNDERS: Rohan M. Ganapathy, Yashas Karanam

The firm specialises in in-space propulsion systems and orbital launch vehicles. It works to facilitate the development of key technologies in electrical propulsion, new-generation propellants and launch vehicles.

the space sector that permitted Indian private players to not only build rockets and satellites but launch them as well. It also mandated that ISRO allow these private companies to use its facilities to test and launch their rockets and other space-based activities. To regulate, coordinate and facilitate all private sector launches and satellite-building across the country, the government formed the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) the same year. The reforms also gave a boost to the plans for NewSpace India Limited, a public sector unit that was set up in 2019, to enter into joint ventures with Indian industry to produce, assemble and integrate launch vehicles initially and satellites later on. "These path-breaking initiatives were designed to keep the doors wide open for the private industry, particularly start-ups, in the space sector. In fact, we should have done it decades earlier," says MoS Singh. For Skyroot, the development was fortuitous as they found ISRO both cooperative and responsive to their needs.

Equally challenging was overcoming the technology obstacles. For, as Chandana put it, "Rocket science is rocket science." Skyroot did not want to reinvent the wheel. Instead, the rocket, which they named after Vikram Sarabhai, the father of the Indian space programme, used several cutting-edge technologies that they could claim as the first in India. These included using carbon-fibre for its motor casing that helps the rocket be lighter but stronger. They also employed the latest 3-D printing technology to build its thrusters. Despite the delays caused by the Covid pandemic, they surprised industry-watchers by the speed with which they readied the rocket for launch. They put Vikram-S through several major tests to ensure it would perform flawlessly and even had a top ISRO group validate all the systems.

Yet, on the day of the launch, Chandana was worried. He knew that space was unforgiving and even the slightest error would mean the end of four years of their work. As the countdown hit zero, Vikram-S lifted off with a blaze of bright orange fumes and smoke on its tail. Within 20 seconds, it had

S. SOMANATH
CHAIRMAN, ISRO
Dr. JITENDRA SINGH
HON'BLE UNION MINISTER
CHAIRMAN

A HAPPY MOMENT
Chandana and Daka with VIPs in ISRO's mission control room at Vikram S's launch

> **"Private players with ISRO collaboration will help build an ecosystem for the sector to grow"**
>
> **– S. SOMANATH**
> *Chairman, ISRO*

> **"The path-breaking initiatives were designed to keep the doors open for the private industry in the space sector, particularly start-ups"**
>
> **– JITENDRA SINGH**
> MoS for Space & Atomic Energy

> **"The aim is to get a much bigger share of the $440 billion global space market"**
>
> **– PAWAN GOENKA**
> *Chairperson, IN-SPACe*

attained hypersonic speed, exceeding Mach5, or five times the speed of sound. Chandana and the others watched the progress of the rocket on giant computer screens and clapped as it followed the projected trajectory. Having reached the desired sub-orbital height of 89.5 km, it began its descent, and crashed into the Bay of Bengal 115 km away from the launch pad. "Bulls-eye," Chandana yelled even as those in the gallery cheered loudly. Skyroot had made space history of sorts in India.

For Pawan Goenka, IN-SPACe chairperson and former managing director of Mahindra & Mahindra, Skyroot's success in the first attempt should convince the sceptics that India's private sector has what it takes to do well in space. "I admit this is a baby step," Goenka said, "but it is a very good beginning for the long journey ahead." It also gave one a sense of how ISRO and the private sector would work together. Goenka was encouraged by the fact that there are over 101 start-ups that have registered after the government's new policy. Of these, over a quarter are at an advanced stage of putting out their first products. Among them is AgniKul Cosmos that was incubated in IIT-Madras in 2018. The Chennai-based start-up is expected to test its launch vehicle called Agnibaan (arrow of fire) next month.

ISRO's Somanath believes that with start-ups like Skyroot beginning to make a mark, private investors are also beginning to exhibit confidence in them. The efforts of Skyroot and AgniKul got a boost when private investors backed them with serious cash. Skyroot was able to raise Rs 500 crore and AgniKul half that amount so far. Skyroot is now gearing up to launch Vikram 1, an orbital flight, and will be offering its services to satellite manufacturers and buyers who are looking for speedy and cost-effective launchers.

Somanath believes the two-pronged approach of encouraging start-ups on the one hand and opening the doors to big private players to collaborate with ISRO on the other will create the ecosystem required for the space sector to grow more rapidly than before. It will leave ISRO to focus more on research and development in the field of advanced space technology while continuing with its existing missions to meet national requirements. This includes *Gaganyaan*, its most ambitious project date, to send three Indian astronauts into the orbit around the Earth. India will then join the big boys of space sooner rather than later or never. ■

GETTY IMAGES

DEFENCE ● THEATRISATION

DISAGREEING WITH JOINTNESS

PROGRESS ON THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE ARMED FORCES INTO THEATRE COMMANDS IS NEARLY AT A STANDSTILL. THE IAF'S STEADFAST OPPOSITION TO IT REMAINS, ALONG WITH CRITICISM FROM EXPERTS

By Pradip R. Sagar

Most of the 20th century's conflicts were fought with land, naval and air forces working as separate units, though the successful prosecution of a war often saw close coordination between the three. In the past decades, military strategy has evolved to dictate an even closer harmony, to the creation of joint responsibility and representation of all military arms over a geographic area, or theatre, with specific

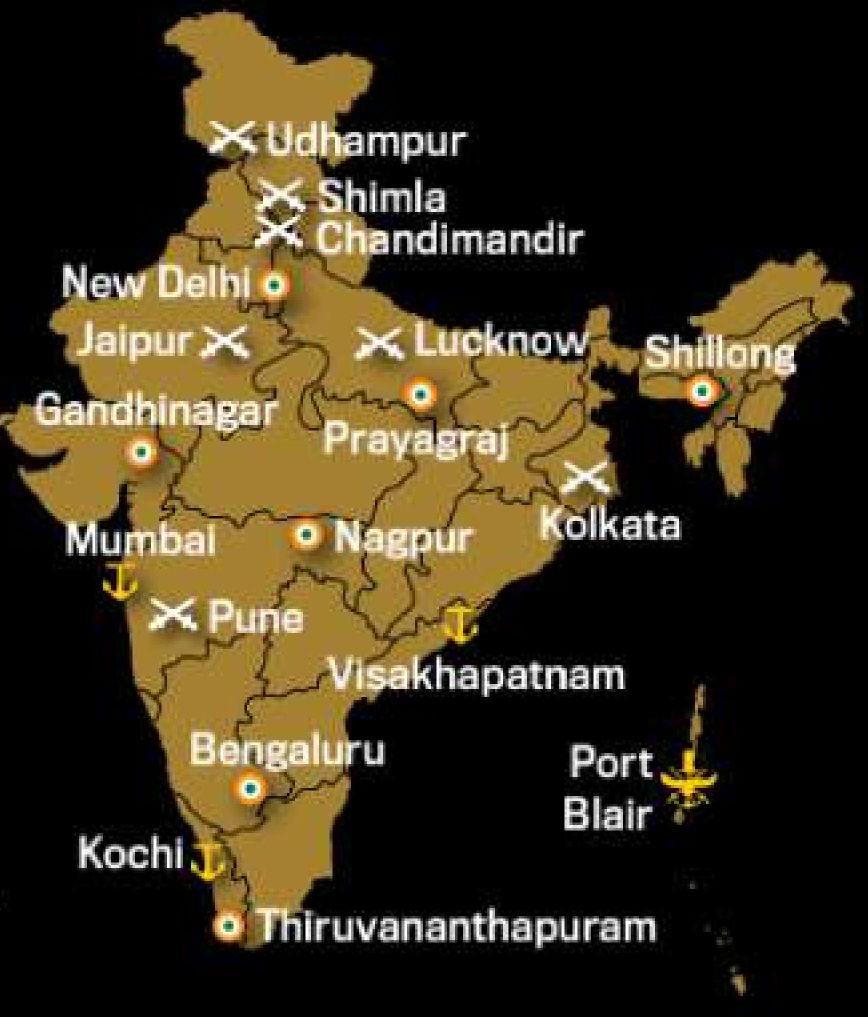
NEW CHIEF CDS Anil Chauhan (third from left) with top army, navy and air force officers in New Delhi

EXISTING STRUCTURE OF ARMED FORCES

The Indian military has a total of 17 commands

- ✕ Seven army commands (six operational)
- ● Seven air force commands (five operational)
- ⚓ Three naval commands (two operational)
- ⚓ Two joint commands (Andaman & Nicobar command and Strategic Forces Command)

In most cases, command of one service overlaps or is linked with two or more commands of sister services. This leads to overlapping of responsibilities and roles



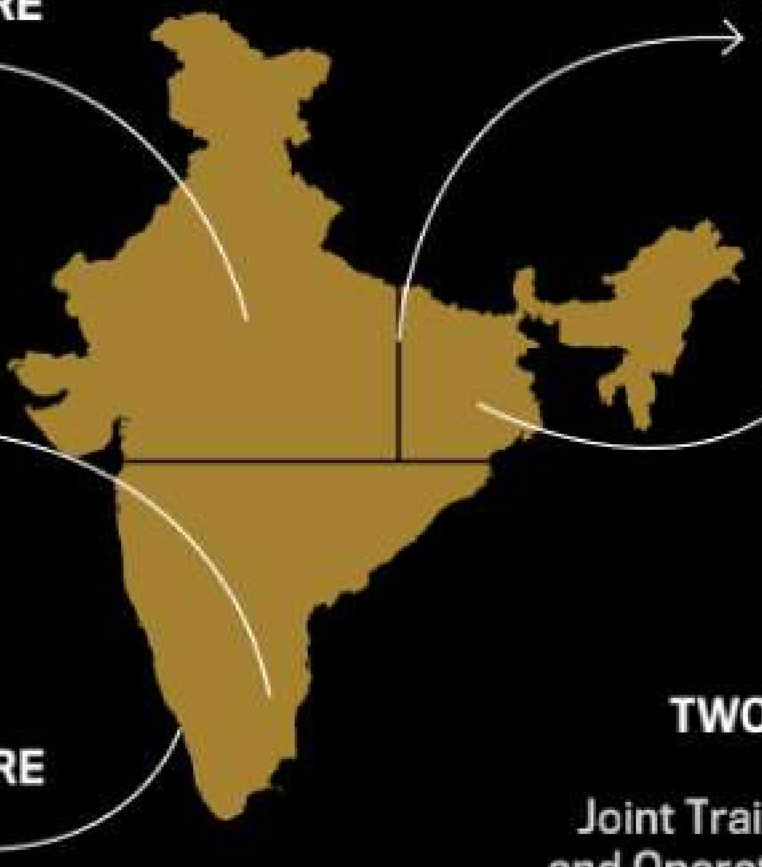
PROPOSED THEATRE COMMAND STRUCTURE

Five commands and two functional commands

WESTERN THEATRE COMMAND
To address the threat from Pakistan

PENINSULAR THEATRE COMMAND
To secure the Indian Ocean Region, south India

MARITIME THEATRE COMMAND
To address maritime threats, amphibious operations



AIR DEFENCE COMMAND
To counter all airborne threats

EASTERN THEATRE COMMAND
To tackle the threat from China

TWO FUNCTIONAL COMMANDS
Joint Training Command and Operational Logistics Command for other service-specific needs

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

roles. The objective is to achieve an integration of military resources so as to maximise combat capability. Thus a 'theatre command' would have units from the army, navy and air force, and operate under a common commander from any of the three services. Logistics, training and even support services would all have to be woven into a unit to bring jointness in operations. This, in a nutshell, is the doctrine of theatrisation. Leading militaries, like those of the United States, Russia and China, operate under this system. The proposal to set up unified commands for the Indian military was first proposed after the Kargil War in 1999, when coordination between the Indian army, navy and air force was found to be lacking. To bring about greater synergy, the Integrated Defence Staff was set up in 2001, but failed in its purpose. Finally, the Narendra Modi government decided to go ahead with the theatrisation plan, and appointed former army chief Gen. Bipin Rawat in December 2019 as the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) to undertake the mammoth exercise to reform and reorganise one of the world's biggest armed forces into theatre commands.

Gen. Rawat was a votary of such jointness, believing that to win future wars, each service has to complement the others in a closer manner. To face the twin threats from Pakistan and China and the prospect of a two-front war, theatrisation was projected as the best option to synergise limited resources and adapt to new-generation warfare. The government, for its part, formed an eight-member panel in June 2021 to fine-tune the plan and sort out differences. Tasked with completing the integration in operations, training,

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

TASK UNFINISHED
Former CDS Gen. Bipin Rawat inspecting a guard of honour on South Block lawns, Jan. 1, 2020

THE IAF, WHICH OPERATES MULTI-ROLE FIGHTERS, IS RELUCTANT TO DIVIDE SCARCE ASSETS. EXPERTS SAY **MORE WORK NEEDS TO BE DONE** BEFORE ADOPTING A FOREIGN CONCEPT LIKE THEATRISATION

communication and logistics in the next three years, Gen. Rawat sent a structure to the three services for their views in November 2021. According to his plan, the armed forces were to be reorganised into five commands. He was to announce the theatre commands by the end of 2022. It was at this juncture that tragedy struck—on December 8, 2021, Gen. Rawat died in a helicopter crash, taking with him the impetus on the issue. Since then, plans for theatrisation have, for all intents and purposes, been on the backburner. It seemed for a while that a tussle amongst the services over command and control vis-à-vis such jointness had gotten the better of any urgency over the matter. There was also resistance to theatrisation within the military over technical matters, most often raised by the Indian Air Force (IAF), which is loath to see the division of its air assets. It is also felt that there is lack of political will on the matter, and that the government is now more invested in implementing the Agniveer recruitment process.

Finally, nearly 10 months after Gen. Rawat's death, the government appointed Lt Gen. (retd) Anil Chauhan as the second CDS. Lt Gen. Chauhan assumed office on October 1 and is yet to spell out his action plan regarding theatrisation. Though in his first official communication to the three services, Gen. Chauhan asked them to move forward with the creation of integrated theatre commands, no visible movement is seen. Military planners now believe that the process will be "deliberate, thoughtful and well-considered".

↘ Five Theatre Commands

The Indian military currently functions under 17 single-service commands: the army and IAF have seven commands each, and the navy has three. Gen. Rawat's plan had envisaged a reorganisation into five commands—eastern, western, peninsular, air defence and maritime—along the lines of the US and Chinese armed forces. The Pakistan-centric western theatre command would extend from Indira Col on Siachen Glacier to Gujarat, with its expected headquarters in Jaipur. The China-specific eastern theatre command would cover the entire 3,488 km of the Line of Actual Control, starting from the icy heights of Ladakh to Kibithu in Arunachal Pradesh and is to be headquartered in Lucknow. These two commands will be land commands and are expected to be led by senior army officers. The proposed peninsular command, responsible for any future operations in the Indian Ocean Region, will be based in Thiruvananthapuram. The maritime command will be based in Karwar, India's biggest naval base, and will have all naval assets of the current western and eastern naval commands along with two brigades of the army (the Thiruvananthapuram-based 91 Brigade and the Port Blair-based 108 Mountain Brigade) and two squadrons of maritime strike jets. It will be responsible for defending India's maritime boundary. The air defence command at Prayagraj will be responsible for protecting military assets from airborne attack and will have the air assets of all the three services, as well as land-based missile defence systems like the S400. Apart from fighter jets of the IAF, it will control anti-aircraft missiles and air defence guns of the army and the navy. It will be headed by the senior-most three-star officer of the IAF. Gen. Rawat had also planned two functional commands—joint training command and operational logistics command, to meet the operational needs of the theatre commands.

↘ Opposition from IAF, other criticism

The most sustained opposition to theatrisation has come from the IAF, especially regarding the air defence command (ADC), which aims to put all of the military's air defence assets under one umbrella. The IAF says that an ADC will stretch and divide its resources, given that it operates only 30 combat squadrons, as against a sanctioned 42. Moreover, during a

GEN. BIPIN RAWAT BELIEVED THAT **TO COUNTER THE TWIN THREAT FROM CHINA AND PAKISTAN, THEATRE COMMANDS** WERE THE BEST OPTION, ALLOWING FOR THE SYNERGY OF LIMITED RESOURCES

conflict, the ADC will have to coordinate with the ground-based northern and western theatre commands, which will also launch their own air missions. With scant resources, says the IAF, such operations are just not practicable.

"His (Gen. Rawat's) move to have theatre commands was driven by passion and emotion, not logic," says a former deputy chief of the IAF. "His mandate was to bring jointness among the services." He believes that when the line of communication and war doctrine of the three services is different, achieving such jointness is not easy.

Within a week of Gen. Chauhan's appointment, Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhary said, "Each service has a doctrine. The doctrinal aspects of the IAF...should not be compromised by this new structure (theatre commands)." He added that creation of an air defence command "may prove counterproductive". He justified his comments by saying that "air defence and offensive air missions are interdependent and, if executed in isolation, will not only be disjointed but also ineffective in execution of joint strategy."

The air force says that the majority of its inventory is of multi-role aircraft, which are not only limited to one purpose. A senior air marshal says that the IAF's fighter jets range from MiG 21 Bisons, Jaguars, Mirages, MiG 29s and Sukhois to the newly inducted Rafale. Except five squadrons of Jaguars (100 jets), which are solely attack aircraft, all can be used in a defence role too. "With the IAF already short of its combat fleet, if we deploy half of our aircraft in air defence and half in attack, we will lose 50 per cent of assets in a defence role. We cannot divide multi-role aircraft in air defence or ground attack. At the most, we can combine the ground element of air defence, like missiles and radars," the air marshal says. Jointness, he believes, comes with joint planning, which has been missing till now.

Some other IAF officers point out that the area covered under China's western theatre command (Tibet and Xinjiang), where People's Liberation Army (PLA) air defence units have formed a combined Air Defence Control System jointly with the PLA-Air Force (PLAAF), is bigger than the area of India. Thus, they argue for a combined India theatre, since they believe our available assets are capable of catering to one theatre.

It's not just the IAF though, there are voices of dissent over theatre commands in army circles too. A serving lieutenant general says that theatrisation "will require massive planning, and execution may have to be undertaken in phases, which may be spread over years". He adds that the concept should be tried out first with a test command, before disturbing the whole framework. There is also a view that India should not be aping a foreign concept like theatrisation, and that what is suitable for the US and China might not work for the Indian armed forces. Lt Gen. Rakesh Sharma, former adjutant-general, says there is a need for revisiting warfighting—how tactics, weapons systems and command and control are integrated—before we look towards making structural changes like theatrisation. "There is a need for joint war doctrine. Then we can move to have joint commands. A separate doctrine for every force does not suit the purpose of future wars," he says.

Former deputy chief of Integrated Defence Staff (Policy Planning and Force Development) Lt Gen. Anil Ahuja believes that the emphasis has to be on improving combat edge, enhancing multi-domain operational capability, optimal utilisation of scarce resources and creation of an authority to "enforce" integrated operational planning and execution. For this, the first, mandatory step should be to formulate a roadmap laying out a vision for integrated military commands—what we desire to achieve through the transformation, likely challenges and ways to overcome these and the final implementation. All this should be related to the budget and timeline.

Lack of clarity on other fundamental issues contributes to the lack of momentum in theatrisation. Many questions remain unanswered and crucial gaps in planning unfilled—overall command and control structure of theatre commands, the degree of autonomy accorded to theatre commanders over service chiefs, how to provide politico-military guidance to geographically separated theatre commanders, unavailability of tri-service integrated communications, paucity of staff with tri-service exposure, and optimal division of inventories of critical platforms. Lt Gen. Ahuja says that putting these building blocks in place, creating models of future integrated HQs and war gaming could help to make a more convincing case that "the time for theatre commands has come".

Some think India needs its own version of the Goldwater Nichols Act of 1986 that reworked the command structure of the US military. "Like in the US and China, India also needs to promulgate a policy document on national security strategy before getting into structural changes like theatre Commands," says Lt Col. (retd) Manoj K. Channan.

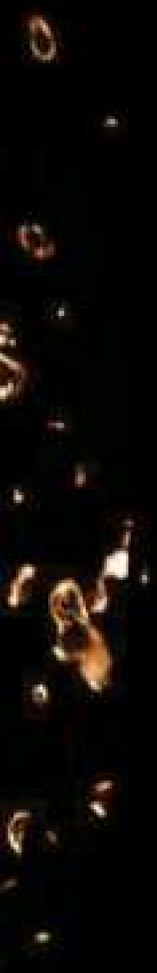
From these diverse voices, it is clear that before being put into place, the concept of theatrisation needs considered evaluation and joint planning, taking into confidence all stakeholders. ■

BITCOIN·DIGITAL·DECEN

CRYPTO CRISIS

The collapse of FTX, the world's third-largest crypto exchange, has intensified fears of **an impending crash of the digital currency, calling for tighter regulations** around its trade to protect investors' interests

By **M.G. ARUN** / *Illustration by* **NILANJAN DAS**



At the peak of his dazzling career, Sam Bankman-Fried, popularly called SBF, was worth $26 billion (over Rs 2 lakh crore). The 30-year-old American entrepreneur, known for his trademark mop of hair and dishevelled looks, had achieved an iconic status in the world of cryptocurrency, becoming its champion in a world ever looking for new ways of wealth creation. He lobbied and donated to prominent government figures, rescued failing crypto projects and pledged much to charity. The success story looked too big to fail until it eventually did. On November 11, Bankman-Fried's Bahamas-based firm FTX, the world's third-largest cryptocurrency exchange with over a million investors, filed for bankruptcy protection, sending the prices of cryptocurrencies crashing on exchanges worldwide. Overall crypto market capitalisation or the total value of cryptocurrencies traded fell from more than $1 trillion (around Rs 82 lakh crore) on November 6 to $803.6 billion (around Rs 66 lakh crore) on November 21. This was also way off the $3 trillion (around Rs 245 lakh crore) valuation cryptos saw last November when the industry was at its peak. Following his firm's collapse, Bankman-Fried's wealth shrank to nearly $1 billion (around Rs 8,100 crore), even as he faced a series of lawsuits and had to give up his position.

The collapse of FTX has been the biggest so far in a series of recent jolts to the crypto business, adding to the commotion in a sector that has faced brickbats for its absence of regulation or any underlying asset value, making millions of investors susceptible to market vagaries. Coming on the back of a crash in crypto valuations following the Ukraine war that has led to fears of a recession in several parts of the world, the latest event has kicked up more questions about the future of the crypto business.

post send by (KARISHNA JI)

Questions are being raised regarding the fate of over 320 million investors worldwide and the $30 billion (almost Rs 2.4 lakh crore) investments made in 2021 alone if the industry were to collapse altogether. Doubts have also been expressed over the real potential of the industry that promised to make financial transactions cheaper, efficient and more transparent. The incident could even prompt lawmakers in some countries to ban cryptos, bringing down the curtain on what would have been yet another new experiment in the financial world.

But that could still be some way off. Although crypto markets fell on the news of the FTX collapse, the direct impact seems contained within investors and fund managers. The rest seem to be waiting and watching the developments with caution. The continuing crypto winter seems to be weighing on the sentiments of investors. "Ever since the bear market in crypto started a few months ago, I haven't even looked at the app dashboard," says Saksham Jain, 25, a crypto investor based in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. "I am just holding on to what I had, so I won't buy or sell for the next 1-1.5 years." Jain has invested around Rs 45,000 in the crypto market.

FALLING CRYPTO GRAPH

TOP 10 CRYPTOS BY MARKET CAP

Overall crypto market capitalisation fell from over $1 trillion (Rs 82 lakh crore) on November 6 to $781.4 billion (Rs 63.9 lakh crore) on November 22 following the FTX collapse

BITCOIN	$15,791.97	▼6.29%	$303.43
ETHEREUM	$1,094.03	▼13.55%	$133.88
TETHER	$0.9991	▲0.01%	$65.44
USD COIN	$1.00	▲0.02%	$44.07
BNB	$256.43	▼7.28%	$41.02
BINANCE USD	$1.00	▼0.04%	$22.79
XRP	$0.3635	▼5.03%	$18.28
CARDANO	$0.3027	▼10.86%	$10.42
DOGECOIN	$0.07505	▼14.00%	$9.96
POLYGON	$0.8295	▼12.02%	$7.25

● Price ● 7-day growth/fall %
● Market cap ($ billion)

Data as on Nov. 22, 2022; 7 pm
Source: coinmarketcap.com

POWERED BY EASY MONEY

The world of cryptos had caught the fancy of investors like Jain during the pandemic when trading in the currency reached frenzied heights as the market boomed, supported by cheap funds from the big financial stimulus that poured into large economies of the world as they battled Covid-19. While the concept of currencies outside the centralised banking system of countries emerged over a decade ago, during the Lehman Brothers crisis in 2008, few countries have allowed their use as legal tender. However, cryptos are extensively used to trade for profit on online platforms. As of December 2021, as many as 15-20 million Indians invested around $6 billion (Rs 49,090 crore) in cryptos on digital platforms, say industry players. There are nearly 40 crypto exchanges in India, big and small, that vie with each other to lure potential investors, especially the youth. The industry employed 50,000, said Nasscom last year, and had the potential to create over 800,000 jobs by 2030.

But such hopes seem to be too far-fetched right now, triggered by the FTX collapse. FTX, along with 130 other entities, filed for bankruptcy following revelations of suspicious bets and trades leading to a run on the exchange and investigations of fraud. Customers began to demand withdrawals to the tune of $6 billion. Meanwhile, an attempt by Binance, the world's largest crypto exchange, to acquire FTX fell through. In 2019, Binance had invested as a shareholder in FTX, and reportedly held 5 per cent in the firm. It exited that shareholding last year and received $2.1 billion (Rs 17,000 crore) in Binance's own stablecoin (BUSD) and in FTT tokens, the cryptocurrency of FTX, as part of the deal, say media reports. Going against its own terms of service, FTX lent $8 billion (Rs 65,344 crore) worth of its customers' assets to Alameda Research, a trading firm specialising in cryptocurrencies owned by Bankman-Fried, say media reports. In return, FTX accepted its own digital tokens as collaterals. FTX has also been accused of siphoning off millions of dollars from the company's accounts. FTX said in its bankruptcy petition that it has $10 billion (Rs 81,680 crore) to $50 billion (over Rs 4 lakh crore) in liabilities and more than 100,000 creditors.

The lack of regulations around cryptos makes it impossible to gauge the number of Indian investors impacted by the crash, but it had a ripple effect across cryptocurrencies and crypto exchanges worldwide. Media reports last week said that Polkadot Currency, which was introduced in November 2021, had dropped nearly 85 per cent post the FTX fiasco and Bitcoin, which hit over $63,000 in April 2021, was down nearly 75

320
MILLION
Number of crypto investors globally

$30
BILLION
(Rs 2.45 lakh crore)
Investments made in cryptos globally in 2021

15-20
MILLION*
Number of crypto investors in India

$6
BILLION*
(Rs 48,600 crore)
Investments by Indians in cryptos

(*As on Dec. 2021)

$26
BILLION
(over Rs 2 lakh crore)
FTX founder and former CEO Sam Bankman-Fried's wealth in March 2022

$1
BILLION
(Rs 8,100 crore)
His reported wealth immediately following the FTX collapse

per cent from that level. Ethereum, which hit a high of around $4,800 in November 2021, had fallen 73 per cent since. Binance Coin, which hit a high of $670 in May 2021, was down by 58 per cent.

REGULATORY ISSUES

One of the biggest concerns regarding cryptocurrencies is on the regulatory front. "FTX is a classic case of lack of regulations. Regulators have been clearly behind the industry's fast pace of growth," says Kunal Nandwani, co-founder and CEO, u-Trade Solutions, a fintech company. "In the US, there are listed crypto futures and people are investing in tokens. There is no adequate control over these crypto exchanges in issuing these coins and tokens." While the US has stringent norms in place to regulate the stock market, when it comes to cryptos, it is unregulated and reckless, he says. "The FTX case will have a ripple effect and may happen in many more exchanges," he cautions.

The FTX incident is not an isolated one. In July, Singapore-based Vauld, a crypto-lending platform founded by Indian entrepreneurs Darshan Bathija and Sanju Kurian, suspended its withdrawals and deposits, leaving nearly 800,000 subscribers in the lurch. Media reports claimed that a majority of the Vauld users were Indian, accounted for 20 per cent of the assets under management and had a daily volume of $10-15 million (Rs 81-122 crore) on the platform. The company blamed the volatile market conditions for this decision. Vauld's action came close on the heels of crypto platforms such as Celsius Network and Voyager Digital, both US-based, suspending trading, leaving hundreds of thousands of investors unable to liquidate their crypto assets.

A LEHMAN BROTHERS MOMENT?

The other major concern at present is whether the FTX collapse will be a Lehman Brothers moment for the crypto industry, and lead to an overall crash of the sector. The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers as a result of the US subprime crisis (where home prices collapsed after a housing bubble) led to a financial meltdown, the effect of which lasted for several years. According to Nandwani, the FTX muddle can indeed be considered crypto's Lehman Brothers moment. There could be a sharp correction in the sector, which will eventually lead to a clean-up, and likely tighter regulations. The only difference here seems to be that the Lehman crisis was much deeper, creating structural problems in the banking system. Some others had more

CRASH COURSE

FTX, along with 130 other entities, filed for bankruptcy on November 11. The company said it has $10 billion (Rs 81,680 crore) to $50 billion (Rs 4 lakh crore) in liabilities, and more than 100,000 creditors

WHY FTX COLLAPSED

- Against its own terms of service, FTX lent $8 billion (Rs 65,344 crore) worth of its customers' assets to Alameda Research, a trading firm specialising in cryptocurrencies, also promoted by Bankman-Fried
- In return, it accepted its own digital tokens FTT that have no underlying value, as collateral tokens, creating a financial hole
- Bankman-Fried was accused of siphoning off millions of dollars from the company accounts
- Suspicious bets and trades led to a run on the exchange and probes of fraud from federal authorities. Customers began to demand withdrawals to the tune of $6 billion (Rs 48,600 crore)
- A failed buyout by Binance, the world's largest crypto exchange, was the last nail in FTX's coffin. In 2019, Binance had invested in FTX, and reportedly held 5 per cent in the firm, but exited last year after receiving $2.1 billion (Rs 17,000 crore) in Binance's own stablecoin and FTT tokens

> **"In the US, there are listed crypto futures and people are investing in tokens. There is no adequate control over these crypto exchanges in issuing these coins and tokens. The FTX case will have a ripple effect and may happen in many more exchanges"**
>
> **KUNAL NANDWANI**
> *Co-founder and CEO, u-Trade Solutions*

dire predictions to offer. "The crypto market is now left for the dead and this was the final nail in the coffin," Suman Bannerjee, CIO, Hedonova, a US-based hedge fund, said. "What we'll see for the next few years is a crypto winter with depressed Bitcoin prices. Institutional investors will have to up their standards of due diligence and most exchanges won't pass that."

There are over 7,000 different cryptocurrencies that are traded publicly, but the number of these currencies in circulation would be much more. The very nature of the cryptos—unregulated and decentralised—means that anyone with knowledge of the underlying technology can launch a cryptocurrency. The surge in interest in cryptocurrencies has also woken up governments worldwide that are now looking at ways and means to maintain a tight leash on these virtual platforms—by no means an easy job—putting in place regulations on cryptocurrency trade and in some cases, as in China, banning cryptocurrency transactions altogether.

REINING IN CRYPTOS

In India, the Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, is still in the works and is yet to be tabled in Parliament. It is still not clear if the country will introduce stringent controls over crypto trading or will ban it altogether, as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) had been advocating. RBI governor Shaktikanta Das had described cryptocurrencies as a "clear danger" and said that anything that derives value based on make-believe, without any underlying asset, is just speculation under a sophisticated name. In the foreword to the RBI's Financial Stability Report, June 2022, Das said, 'While technology has supported the reach of the financial sector, its benefits must be fully harnessed, its potential to disrupt financial stability has to be guarded against.'

The RBI's solution to address the need for digital money seems to be a digital rupee. In November, it launched, on a pilot basis, a Central Bank Digital Currency or a digital version of the rupee. The e-rupee will be released in two forms: wholesale for interbank settlements and retail for the public. Experts do not see the e-rupee gaining much traction in a market that has already seen a big surge in payments using the UPI (unified payments interface) platform. Moreover, the country seems to be waiting for a precedent in the developed world before pursuing any stringent regulations. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that a collective global effort was needed to deal with the problems posed by cryptocurrencies. "The kind of technology it is associated with, the decision taken by a single country will be insufficient to deal with its challenges. We have to have a similar mindset," Modi said.

Although there is no regulation on crypto trade in India yet, the taxes imposed in the Union budget this year have disincentivised many from such investments. The Centre has levied a 30 per cent tax on all Virtual Digital Assets' transactions, whether short-term or long-term in nature. Moreover, losses incurred on cryptocurrencies cannot be offset against profits from any other asset or business. The Centre has also imposed a 1 per cent TDS (tax deducted at source) on all crypto transactions.

Industry exchanges in India say that they have taken measures to safeguard the interest of investors given the FTX crash. "As a custodian of the trust of 18 million users and as India's leading crypto investing app, we believe the onus is on us to build a credible, responsible and trustworthy crypto ecosystem in India," Ashish Singhal, co-founder and CEO, Coinswitch, a leading crypto exchange, said. "We take our fiduciary duties seriously. Our financials are fully audited. We have zero exposure to FTX or Alameda Research." He said that his firm's business model is simple and straightforward—it earns commissions from transactions. But investors are still cautious. "The FTX episode makes you think that even the biggest institutions in the crypto industry can fall in an instant, so I think it's going to be a long and scary ride ahead throughout the bear market," says Jain, adding that he won't be surprised if this happens with other crypto giants as well. He trades on Binance, and hopes that "it's too big to fall."

The crypto sector is at the crossroads. As dark clouds loom on the horizon, it is the hapless investors who risk losing their money in what is perhaps the most uncertain asset class that exists today. Before a major collapse of the crypto market singes investors, large economies should take the lead to put systems in place that can protect their interests and money. Or else, one of the most exciting financial concepts of the present day can turn into the worst nightmare. ■

"Anything that derives value based on make-believe, without any underlying asset, is just speculation under a sophisticated name. While technology has supported the reach of the financial sector and its benefits must be fully harnessed, its potential to disrupt financial stability has to be guarded against"

SHAKTIKANTA DAS
Governor, Reserve Bank of India

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SATHYA SAI 2.0?
Madhusudan Sai gives a religious discourse every Thursday and Sunday at Sathya Sai Grama, Muddenahalli

AN HEIR OF DOUBT

A FORMER STUDENT TAKES OVER SATHYA SAI BABA'S PREACHINGS AND PRACTICE, UPSETTING THE OLD GUARD

By Amarnath K. Menon

His acolytes call him the 21st century avatar of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. His detractors beg to differ. He has transformed Sathya Sai Grama, nothing more than a collection of buildings a decade ago, into a thriving spiritual sanctuary that brings alive the preachings and practices of the Sri Sathya Sai Baba. The spiritual guru's original home, Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, managed by the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust (SSSCT), is losing both flock and popularity to the upstart, as it were.

War has erupted over the legacy of the Sathya Sai Baba, who passed away in 2011. On one side is the 43-year-old Madhusudan Naidu, a business management graduate of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL)—one of the many colleges that Sri Sathya Sai Baba had set up in Puttaparthi—who claims to be the legitimate heir of the spiritual guru. On the other is the guru's nephew, R.J. Rathnakar, managing trustee of the SSSCT since 2020, who sees Naidu as nothing more than a pretender and claims to be the real custodian of Sathya Sai Baba's endowments.

Long-time Sathya Sai devotees and associates of the Puttaparthi-based institutions resent the rise of Madhusudan and B.N. Narasimha Murthy, a former SSSIHL hostel warden, who lead the rival faction. "Puttaparthi is the most sacrosanct place for devotees," says former Andhra Pradesh minister J. Geetha Reddy. "It is from here that Sathya Sai spread the mission of service and love."

However, despite Rathnakar's multiple efforts to expand the (SSSCT) base, Prasanthi Nilayam's activities have not grown exponentially since Sathya Sai Baba's death. In contrast, under Naidu, or Sadguru Madhusudan Sai as he is known now, Sathya Sai Grama, a picturesque 100-acre hamlet nestled in a valley of vineyards in Muddenahalli, a short drive from Bengaluru airport, in Karnataka's Chikkaballapur district, is poised to become a holy hub rivalling Prasanthi Nilayam, where the late guru had lived and died. The pivot of Muddenahalli's Sathya Sai Grama is no ordinary pulpit preacher. Following in the footsteps of his spiritual master, Madhusudan has been able to cultivate a charismatic image. He may not have the curly mop of hair that his guru had, but with a crew cut, a clean-shaven look, a forever affable expression on his face, and shiny saffron silk robe, he has a distinctive persona of his own.

However, it's not from appearance alone that Madhusudhan derives his legitimacy. It is also drawn from his late guru's statements such as "My students are my property" and the agents of change who would make his dream of a new world of harmony, peace, acceptance, service and love come true. Shashidhar Prasad, a former vice-chancellor of the University of Mysuru and SSSIHL, ascribes the rapid growth of Sathya Sai Grama to Madhusudan's mystical powers. "Swami (Sri Sathya Sai Baba) told me that he would spend the last part of his life in the hilltop building at Sathya Sai Grama in Muddenahalli. One day, when I was asked to meet brother Madhusudan there, I was amazed that he revealed many things about my interactions with Swami that were highly personal," says Prasad. It is anecdotes like these that have served to strengthen Madhusudhan's claim on Sathya Sai Baba's legacy.

Muddenahalli's connection to Sri Sathya Sai Baba and Puttaparthi goes back five decades. It was here that an ardent devotee, Madiyal Narayan Bhat, set up the Satya Sai Grama (SSG) after he met Sai Baba in 1962. A residential school for boys was founded in 1972 and, a few years later, a pre-university college. Until a decade ago, these were the only buildings at SSG apart from the community hall where Sri Sathya Sai Baba would give darshan while travelling between his ashrams at Puttaparthi and Whitefield in Bengaluru.

PUPIL'S PROGRESS

प्रथम दीक्षांत समारोह २०२२ - श्री सत्य साई मानव अभ्युदय विश्व विद्यालय
मुख्य अतिथि - आदरणीय श्री मोहन जी भागवत
First Convocation 2022

ALMA MATER First convocation of the Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Kalaburagi, Karnataka

Given his middle-class moorings in the BALCO township in Chhattisgarh, Madhusudan Naidu realised early that hard work is the passport to success. After moving to Puttaparthi, he made the most of the opportunity while studying at the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (SSSIHL). There, he bagged a gold medal in BSc (Chemistry) in 1999, an outstanding grade in MSc (Chemistry) in 2001 and another gold medal in MBA (2003). During these years, the young Madhusudan observed and picked up Sathya Sai Baba's traits.

After his MBA, he did a stint with the HDFC Bank between 2003 and 2009, and ran a financial advisory firm in Bengaluru from 2009 to 2011. Following Sathya Sai's demise in 2011, he joined hands with B.N. Narasimha Murthy, a former SSSIHL hostel warden, and decided to take his mission forward by breaking away from Prasanthi Nilayam. Along with C. Sreenivas, who was associated with Sathya Sai's healthcare mission, and Isaac Tigrett of Hard Rock Café fame, who was among those who funded the mission's first super-speciality hospital, they claim to have come together at the late guru's behest to build new institutions. Though the Prasanthi Nilayam establishment has rejected Madhusudan, this has not deterred his devotees. "I knew Madhusudan as a student and Narasimha Murthy as a hostel warden," says A. Anantharaman, a former SSSIHL faculty member. "Brilliant as they were in their roles at Prasanthi Nilayam, I cannot believe their human capabilities could create the structure at Muddenahalli and ensure exponential expansion without some spiritual power."

At Sathya Sai Grama, chanting of prayers and singing of bhajans are part of the daily routine just like they are at Prasanthi Nilayam. Madhusudan gives a religious discourse on Thursdays and Sundays. He lives in a two-storeyed building designed like a temple, with a prayer hall on the ground floor and his personal quarters above it. Though he has positioned himself as Sathya Sai's spiritual successor, some are sceptical about his devotional quotient. Sceptics say his devotional activity does not have the same traction as that of Sathya Sai, though several senior devotees go to Muddenahalli now because of what is being done in the areas of healthcare and education.

CENTRE OF ATTENTION
Mahasamadhi of Sri Sathya Sai Baba in Prasanthi Nilayam

WITH PRASANTHI NILAYAM UNABLE TO EXPAND ITS OUTREACH, MADHUSUDAN HAS MANAGED TO **SHIFT FOCUS TO SATHYA SAI GRAMA**

He had given instructions to build a home on his last visit to Muddenahalli in 2009. So Anandam, a building atop a hillock with a spiral ramp leading up to it, was designed as his residence. On top of the building is a clock tower with a 153-feet statue of Shiva and another one of Nandi coming up next to it. Once Sai Baba died in 2011, Madhusudhan moved into the space he vacated.

THE RISE AND RISE OF MADHUSUDAN

Under his guidance, the Sathya Sai Grama has come into its own, attracting devotees and celebrities alike. Madhusudhan says he banks on two watchwords—Love and Service—about the power of affection and its manifestation in serving the needy, to carry forward Sai Baba's legacy. He calls the triple elixir of nutrition, education and healthcare as the prime areas of service. A year after Sai Baba's death, Madhusudan had a school opened in Kalaburagi, north Karnataka, followed by a paediatric cardiac care hospital at Nava Raipur Atal Nagar, Chhattisgarh. His mission has only evolved and grown ever since.

The pace at which things have moved under his watch has been astonishing, say his supporters. A 300-bed multi-speciality hospital, the Sri Sathya Sai Sarala Memorial Hospital, catering to the poor, came up on the Muddenahalli campus in 2018. The swanky hospital, built in the shape of a swastika, is currently the busiest place in Sathya Sai Grama with a long line of patients at the registration counter. "We see close to 1,000 outdoor patients daily," claims S.S. Bharath Kumar, head of projects. Their focus is mostly on congenital heart diseases in children, obstetrics and gynaecology. The 250 staffers include 70 doctors. Most of them stay on campus and their children study in the school there. Among them is Shagufta Ara, a nurse from Jammu & Kashmir, who was recognised as a Covid warrior during her stint at Srinagar's Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Hospital where she attended to 100 newborns during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. Later that year, during a visit to the Muddenahalli ashram to receive an award, she decided to quit her job at the Srinagar hospital and shift base along with her husband, two daughters and parents-in-law. Ara now handles the neonatal intensive care unit at the Sri Sathya Sai Sarala Memorial Hospital. "I was very impressed during our visit," she says.

Apart from the hospital, a block of apartments was also built for ashram residents and guests. Next in line was a 5,000-seat auditorium. Work on a sports stadium is going on, while a school for music and the performing arts is on the drawing board. Bhuvana Santhanam, CEO of global outreach at Sathya Sai Grama, makes it a point to emphasise that everything is free on campus. "Housing, food, electricity, water...the institution takes care of everything," she says. Like many others here, she too is an alumna of SSSIHL. Described by some as 'Madhusudan's right hand', Santhanam worked as a strategic brand and image management consultant for 20 years before she settled here in 2015.

Madhusudan is said to be involved in every aspect of the burgeoning organisation. He travels through the year for board meetings and site visits, conducting team reviews and developing strategies to expand his mission's footprint. Planning to strengthen the initiatives through collaborations, he has come up with the 3S model—a convergence of *samaja* (society), *sarkara* (government) and *samstha* (institution)—to implement a slew of services and achieve a larger impact with scale. To this end, he set up the Sai Global Federation of Foundations that brings together an international community of organisations. There are 35 registered trusts and foundations across 33 countries, including India, that implement the various projects.

As a result, Madhusudan now spearheads a global mission that has established institutes of education, healthcare, nutrition and spirituality in most of these countries. It runs six multi-speciality hospitals in India and three abroad that offer free healthcare. There are 37 educational institutions across 27 campuses and a university at Kalaburagi, Karnataka, besides three institutions abroad—in Laos, Nigeria, and Australia—that provide 'value-based education' to over 6,000 children. In addition, 12 Centres for Human Development have been set up in 11 countries to work towards the "welfare and well-being of all as one global family". "Indian culture always taught everyone to pray for the welfare of everyone else... A global family is an Indian idea," says Madhusudan whenever he initiates a new project.

FUNDING THE MISSION

The influential California-based Sri Sathya Sai International Organisation (SSSIO), headed by Dr Narendranath Reddy that had remained neutral when Sri Sathya Sai Baba was alive, now supports the pro-Madhusudan-led group. Funding comes from members of the SSSIO, besides corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions from India and abroad. "Total investments have crossed $200 million across the three verticals—nutrition, education and healthcare," says B.N. Narasimha Murthy, chairman, Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Kalaburagi. Indeed, raising resources is not seen as a challenge at all. "The selfless work has inspired individuals, foundations and corporates in India and abroad to support the cause," says C. Sreenivas, chairman, Sri Sathya Sai Health and Education Trust.

"What is most fascinating is the speed of execution. They try to complete every project in 11 months," says A. Balasubramanian, managing director, Aditya Birla Sun Life AMC Ltd. Sarod maestro Amjad Ali Khan, who has been visiting and performing at Muddenahalli since 2018 concurs and says, "The work being done towards education, healthcare and nutrition is truly selfless. It's a way of doing service that we value in all religions."

Conscious of this growing influence of the Muddenahalli group, Sai baba's nephew and Madhusudan's rival Rathnakar is stepping up efforts to expand Puttaparthi's appeal. At Sai Baba's marble *mahasamadhi* in Prasanthi Nilayam's chandeliered Sai

A WEB OF INSTITUTIONS

Institutions set up by the breakaway group based in Muddenahalli, Karnataka

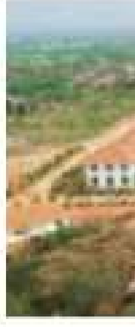
↘ SRI SATHYA SAI ANNAPOORNA TRUST
Its morning nutrition programme offers breakfast to over a million school-going children, mostly from government schools in rural areas

↘ SRI SATHYA SAI LOKA SEVA GURUKULAM GROUP OF INSTITUTIONS
It has 27 campuses across 20 districts of Karnataka, and one each in Telangana and Tamil Nadu

↘ SRI SATHYA SAI UNIVERSITY FOR HUMAN EXCELLENCE
This is the higher education wing, offering undergraduate (including degree programme in the performing arts), postgraduate and research programmes

↘ SRI SATHYA SAI LOKA SEVA VEDA GURUKULAM
A Vedic studies and research centre

↘ INSTITUTE OF HUMAN VALUES
Online learning platform with value-based courses for parents, teachers, healthcare and management professionals, teenagers, social workers and spiritual seekers



↘ EACH ONE EDUCATE ONE FOUNDATION
An alumni initiative to bring quality education to rural students of the Sri Sathya Sai Loka Seva Gurukulam Group of Institutions

↘ SRI SATHYA SAI SANJEEVANI CENTRES FOR CHILD HEART CARE
Three completely free-of-cost hospitals in Nava Raipur (Chhattisgarh), Palwal (Haryana) and Navi Mumbai (Maharashtra)

↘ SRI SATHYA SAI SANJEEVANI MOTHER AND

GLOBAL FOOTPRINT

Madhusudan Sai's mission runs several projects in foreign countries

↘ FIJI ISLANDS
Sri Sathya Sai Sanjeevani Medical Centre, set up in 2018; Sri Sathya Sai Sanjeevani Children's Heart Screening Centre set up in 2019; and Sri Sathya Sai Sanjeevani Children's Heart Hospital set up in 2022; all in Suva

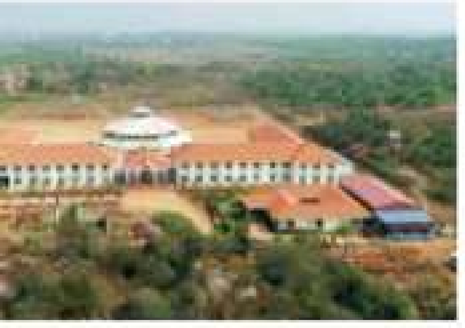
↘ NIGERIA: Aruike Speciality Hospital set up in 2016 in Enugu, and in 2020 in Irno

↘ SRI LANKA: Sri Sathya Sai Karunalayam Medical Centre set up in 2017 in Batticaloa

↘ UNITED STATES
Sathya Sai Sanjeevani Medical Centre set up in 2019 in Clarksdale, Mississippi

↘ NIGERIA: Heart of Love Children's Home shelters destitute children; Nneani Farms, whose produce was distributed among the needy during the Covid pandemic

◀ **BEYOND BORDERS** The Embodiment of Love Academy—Skills Acquisition Centre, Enugu, Nigeria



IN THE SPIRIT OF SERVICE
(Clockwise from top left) Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Kalaburagi; Sri Sathya Sai Mother and Child Hospital, Yavatmal, Maharashtra; Sri Sathya Sai Prasanthi Niketan for Girls, Siddipet, Telangana

CHILD HOSPITALS
In Nava Raipur (Chhattisgarh),Yavatmal (Maharashtra), Palwal (Haryana) and Raiwala (Uttarakhand)

DIVINE MOTHER AND CHILD HEALTH PROGRAMME
A comprehensive early detection and systemic health screening programme for rural school-going children and expecting or lactating mothers. Also provides multinutrient supplements to address their specific nutritional needs

SRI SATHYA SAI SARLA MEMORIAL HOSPITAL
A 300-bed multi-speciality high dependency in-patient facility at Sathya Sai Grama, Muddenahalli

AAROGYA VAHINI TRUST
Provides free-of-cost healthcare services to vulnerable communities in rural West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam

PRASHANTI BALAMANDIRA TRUST
It provides free healthcare and plans to establish a medical college by 2023 to offer medical education completely free of cost to the rural poor with an investment of Rs 300 crore and including a 400-bed hospital at Sathya Sai Grama, Muddenahalli

SRI SATHYA SAI ARADHANA TRUST
Organises yajnas and pujas, besides religious and spiritual talks

Kulwant Hall, devotees recently pledged to take up Narayana Seva—feeding the poor—in the run-up to the centenary celebrations of 'Bhagwan's Divine Advent' in November 2025. On November 20, during the 97th birthday celebrations, Nimish Pandya, all-India president of the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations (SSSSO), announced a target of feeding one million people by 2025.

In 2020, Rathnakar lobbied with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and managed to secure global recognition for the SSSCT's humanitarian work in 2020. A year later, he set up the Sri Sathya Sai Global Council (SSSGC) to guide the activities of the SSSSOs in India and other countries. All the rituals and social outreach through education and health services initiated in the guru's lifetime continue under Rathnakar's leadership, with a few additions such as a convention centre and the Sri Sathya Sai Media Centre in Prasanthi Nilayam and a multimedia museum at Brindavan, Whitefield, in Bengaluru. Puttaparthi is now also the headquarters of a district named after Sathya Sai, thanks to Rathnakar's lobbying with Andhra Pradesh chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy.

On May 8 this year, SSSGC cautioned devotees that it has nothing to do with the California-headquartered SSSIO or any of its constituents that back Madhusudan. It stated that it has no affiliation to or recognition from the SSSCT in Prasanthi Nilayam or from Sri Sathya Sai organisations in the US and other parts of the world affiliated to the Global Council. SSSGC has also rejected Madhusudan's claim that he channels the spirit of the late Sathya Sai, though mere rejection of the claim may not be sufficient to rein in the breakaway group. Rathnakar refused to speak despite several attempts by INDIA TODAY to contact him.

However, despite Rathnakar's various initiatives, Prasanthi Nilayam has not been able to increase the flow of devotees or expand its social outreach. As of now, Sathya Sai's legacy seems to be doing far better under Madhusudhan's leadership, aided by the massive expansion he has engineered. Rathnakar may find himself confined to Puttaparthi and its environs. ■

with Ajay Sukumaran

THE SATHYA SAI NETWORK

Institutions run by the Puttaparthi establishment

SRI SATHYA SAI CENTRAL TRUST
Apex panel set up by Sri Sathya Sai Baba to oversee all activities initiated by him

SRI SATHYA SAI INSTITUTE OF HIGHER LEARNING
Runs free undergraduate and post-graduate programmes

SRI SATHYA SAI VIDYA VAHINI
An edtech platform

SRI SATHYA SAI CENTRE FOR HUMAN VALUES
Develops content for publications and training programmes to enhance the understanding and practice of Sathya Sai's teachings

SRI SATHYA SAI SADHANA TRUST
Rolls out educational material about Sathya Sai and his teachings in digital formats

SRI SATHYA SAI INSTITUTE OF HIGHER MEDICAL SCIENCES, PRASANTIGRAM
A 300-bed super-speciality hospital in Puttaparthi

SRI SATHYA SAI INSTITUTE OF HIGHER MEDICAL SCIENCES, BENGALURU
A 333-bed super speciality hospital

SRI SATHYA SAI MOBILE HOSPITAL PROGRAMME
A rural outreach health service from the first to the 12th day of every month serves 63 villages near Puttaparthi

STEALING THE SHOW
(Clockwise from left) Rishab Shetty in a still from *Kantara* (2022), Rakshit Shetty in *777 Charlie* (2022), and *Raj B. Shetty* in *Garuda Gamana Vrishabha Vahana (2021)*

CINEMA | **KANNADA FILMS**

A TALE OF THREE SHETTYS

THE SUCCESS OF ***KANTARA*** IS NO FLASH IN THE PAN. KANNADA CINEMA HAS BEEN QUIETLY UNDERGOING A TRANSFORMATION, AND THREE ACTORS, IN PARTICULAR, MUST BE LAUDED FOR IT

By Ajay Sukumaran and Suhani Singh

BEFORE SEPTEMBER 30, THE DAY *Kantara* released, if someone had told Kannada actor-writer-director Rishab Shetty that he'd be promoting his film even a month after its release—and outside Karnataka—he'd have laughed it off. Not many outside the state had heard of him till a few months back. But in no time, the 39-year-old was offering prayers at Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai, and there was a trip to India Gate in Delhi, all part of the endorsements for the Hindi-dubbed version of his film, which continues to run in theatres in Mumbai. "I still don't know why it became such a big hit," says Rishab, who brilliantly essays the role of a man child-turned-rebel who finds his calling in '*boota kola*', a vibrant folk ritual from coastal Karnataka.

Seated in the office of Hombale Films in Bengaluru, Rishab is beaming. *Kantara*, with an estimated budget of Rs 16 crore, has thus far grossed nearly Rs 350 crore nationwide, and half of its collections have come from outside Karnataka. It is also the second Kannada film in 2022 to have taken the nation by storm. In April, another Hombale Films title, part II of the *K.G.F.* franchise, became a roaring hit as it gave India its new-generation 'angry young man' in Rocky, played by Yash. The action drama is the highest-grossing Indian film of 2022 and the second highest-grossing film in the country of all time.

The Kannada film industry, which for long played second fiddle to its southern neighbours (Tamil, Telugu, and even Malayalam, which doesn't have the financial clout of Chennai or Hyderabad but makes up for it with its ingenious storytelling), now finds itself in the spotlight. And it's three Shettys—Rishab, Rakshit and Raj—who have quietly propelled it to this pinnacle of success.

A LONG JOURNEY

In 2014, when Rakshit Shetty was breaking down a door and rattling off a 1980s Naseeruddin Shah line, '*phata poster nikla hero*', in his first venture *Ulidavaru Kandanthe* (2014) as a filmmaker, he was a struggling actor with a chance hit. In the frame with him was his co-star Rishab. Very few outside Karnataka

post send by (KARISHNA JI)

RISHAB SHETTY

↘ *Kantara* (2022)

A drama/thriller set around the 'boota kola' tradition, *Kantara* was written and directed by Rishab Shetty, who also plays the lead in it; Raj B. Shetty shot a few scenes

↘ *Bell Bottom* (2019)

Directed by Jayathirtha B.V., *Bell Bottom* is a detective-comedy film, which has Rishab in the lead role

RAKSHIT SHETTY

↘ *Ulidavaru Kandanthe* (2014)

A gangster film set in Udupi, *Ulidavaru Kandanthe* was written and directed by Rakshit Shetty, and starred both him and Rishab Shetty

↘ *Kirik Party* (2016)

A college romance film written by and starring Rakshit, directed by Rishab

↘ *777 Charlie* (2022)

While Rakshit produced this adventure-drama as well as starred in it, the film was written and directed by Kiranraj K.; Raj B. Shetty collaborated on dialogues

RAJ B. SHETTY

↘ *Ondu Motteya Kathe* (2017)

Raj B. Shetty wrote, directed and starred in this romantic comedy about a bald lecturer in Mangaluru

↘ *Garuda Gamana Vrishabha Vahana* (2021)

With Raj and Rishab Shetty in lead roles, this gangster film is set in Mangaluru and has been written and directed by Raj himself

were familiar with their work back then. And yet, *Kantara*, coming eight years later, is no flash in the pan. A new wave of Kannada cinema, which started with Pawan Kumar's *Lucia* (2013), a crowd-funded film that upended conventional cinema tropes, was perhaps the first hint of the success that was to grace the Kannada film industry years later. The Shettys contributed to it by making films packed with local flavour that revealed little-explored parts of the state. Take, for instance, Raj B. Shetty's 2021 flick *Garuda Gamana Vrishabha Vahana* (GGVV), which offers a micro-history of coastal Mangaluru through the crimes and misdemeanours of friends-turned-foes (played by Raj and Rishab). There's also Rakshit's *777 Charlie* (2022), about a lonely factory worker and a Labrador dog.

The Shettys, interestingly, are unique because they don't just act in and produce but also write and direct films. Before bagging a minor role of a police officer in *Lucia*, Rishab had done three films, including one with Rakshit. That film, *Tuglak* (2012), failed, but it cemented their friendship. "We used to sit outside the theatre waiting for people to turn up," recalls Rakshit. Discussing scripts, the duo first set out to work on a short film before taking up *Ulidavaru Kandanthe*. "I thought I should probably write something for myself where I can show my potential as an actor. That's the reason I started writing," says Rakshit.

Ulidavaru Kandanthe, with Rakshit directing, Rishab assisting and both acting, didn't do well at the box office either, but it became a cult favourite. Set in Udupi, from where the two hailed, the movie broke with convention: it was possibly the first commercial film to showcase the Mangaluru region's own milieu and dialect, which is distinct from the Kannada spoken elsewhere. These had so far remained neglected in mainstream cinema, to the extent that the Mangaluru accent, whenever it was deployed, usually served as mere comic relief. Yet, Kannada arthouse cinema frequently explored themes from these regions. "It was a surprise that he [Rakshit] did something so ambitious for his first film," says filmmaker Srinivas Bhashyam, who has assisted the likes of Girish Kasaravalli and Mani Ratnam. "It was an inventive, non-linear and witty narrative. And while a Tarantino-esque influence was obvious, he also used music very enthusiastically, like the best of mainstream cinema."

A key realisation for the Kannada film industry was that even small-budget films with engaging themes can shine at the box office, and it came in 2017 with Raj B. Shetty's *Ondu Motteya Kathe* (Story of a Bald Man), which was about a bald lecturer in the sleepy city of Mangaluru. Raj, who was until then a newcomer, followed up on the Mangaluru theme with *GGVV*, which won

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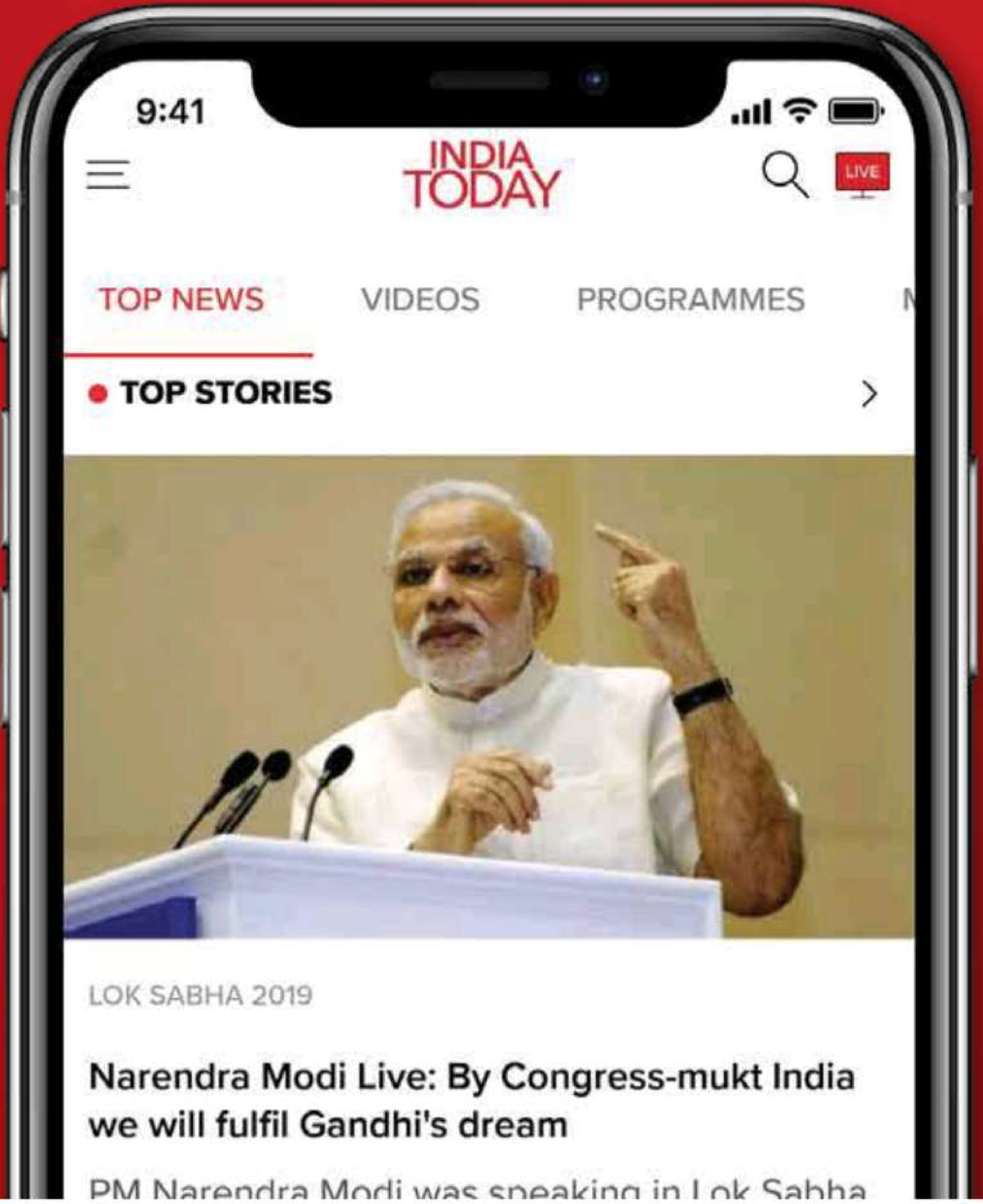
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praise from writer-director Anurag Kashyap, who placed it in the same league as acclaimed gangster dramas *Subramaniapuram* (2008, Tamil), *Angamaly Diaries* (2017, Malayalam) and *Vada Chennai* (2018, Tamil). "Stories are everywhere, but you need to tell them. Nothing travels or moves [you] like local stories," Raj said in an interview after *GGVV*'s release. He has also directed *Kantara's* 'boota kola' scenes and worked on the dialogues for *777 Charlie*.

The three Shettys' simple beginnings reflect in their work. Rakshit, who used to work as an IT engineer in Bengaluru, grew up in Udupi and was a fan of the local 'Pilivesha' dance (tiger dance), which he drafted into his film as a recurring motif (Pilivesha also makes an appearance in *GGVV*). Similarly, Rishab was not even in his teens when he first put on make-up and a costume for the annual 'yakshagana' tradition in his village Keradi, in Kundapura. He credits it for teaching him about 'angika abhinaya' (expression through the medium of the body). "It was my introduction to the tales from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and has had a huge influence on my acting." He would later do theatre, which strengthened his acting skills. Raj, who grew up in Mangaluru, studied social work before he started writing his own scripts. The first film, he told an interviewer, was written on a lonely stretch of the seashore in Mangaluru in the shade of a fishing boat.

Though Kannada films were being dubbed into Hindi and other languages earlier as well, the industry wasn't actively marketing its work to the national audience. In fact, Kannada cinema wasn't even recognised as an industry outside Karnataka, say Chaluve Gowda and Vijay Kiragandur of Hombale Films, which was set up in 2013. "We felt we can take the industry to the next level," they say. "It's not like we had no good actors or directors, or that our movies were not made in other languages. But nobody has tried to make content from Karnataka reach a global audience."

With *K.G.F.* and *Kantara*, the company has had two consecutive hits in less than six months. "Our intention isn't to take every film to the pan-India level," they say, adding that they instead intend to have one pan-India film a year. The banner currently has 14 films in the pipeline, including the Prabhas-starrer *Salaar*, a Malayalam film, *Dhoomam*, with actor Fahadh Faasil, and a Tamil film with Keerthy Suresh. Also on the cards is *Richard Anthony* (part two of *Ulidavaru Kandanthe*), with Rakshit both directing and starring.

"OUR INTENTION ISN'T TO TAKE EVERY FILM TO THE PAN-INDIA LEVEL, BUT TO HAVE ONE PAN-INDIA FILM A YEAR"

VIJAY KIRAGANDUR, CHALUVE GOWDA
Hombale Films

IT'S ABOUT TEAMWORK

Collaboration between directors, producers, writers and actors in several new Kannada movies is a trend comparable to the Malayalam industry, says Bhashyam. "[But] it is new to Indian cinema."

The approach is rooted in sheer strategy. "When I made *Ulidavaru Kandanthe*, I thought people would rush to theatres," says Rakshit. When they didn't, he sought out new filmmakers to ensure a steady supply of cinema that would grow an audience. Since 2014, Rakshit has worked with several new directors, while his production house, Paramvah Studios, brought together a pool of writers—mostly friends—who went by the name The Seven Odds. It included Rishab and himself. "We need at least 10 filmmakers to be making at least 10 films a year because you cannot make just one film a year and say 'we're also catering to the class audience'," says Rakshit.

The formula seems to have worked. In 2016, *Kirik Party*, a college story written by Rakshit and directed by Rishab, became a smash hit. The film made nearly 10 times its budget of Rs 2.5 crore, says producer Pushkara Mallikarjunaiah. While it engaged audiences from non-Kannada-speaking regions, fans back home were already drawing parallels with the 1980s, the golden era of Shankar Nag. *Kirik Party* was an eclectic project, with music composer Ajaneesh Lokanath, who also wrote the score for *Kantara*, being a key presence. Rishab then went on to work on his own films, such as the National Award-winning *Sarkaari Hiriya Praathamika Shaale* (2018), and the detective-comedy *Bell Bottom* (2019), which gave him his first lead role.

Mallikarjunaiah says the current stream of box-office successes in Karnataka is a due culmination of the efforts over the past six years. "Rishab, coming from nowhere, made a Rs 300 crore film. It says that content is king. Film producers are confident that they can go ahead with good content and new actors."

As Rishab basks in the success of *Kantara*, he intends to stick to what he knows best: make films in Kannada. "Hindi-speaking audiences from various states liked a story from a village in coastal Karnataka. Do I have to change my storytelling for my next film? I don't think so... I have to, and will stick to, my roots," he says.

Going by the response to *Kantara*, perhaps that's what filmgoers want: raw, authentic local stories that stand out from the rest. ■

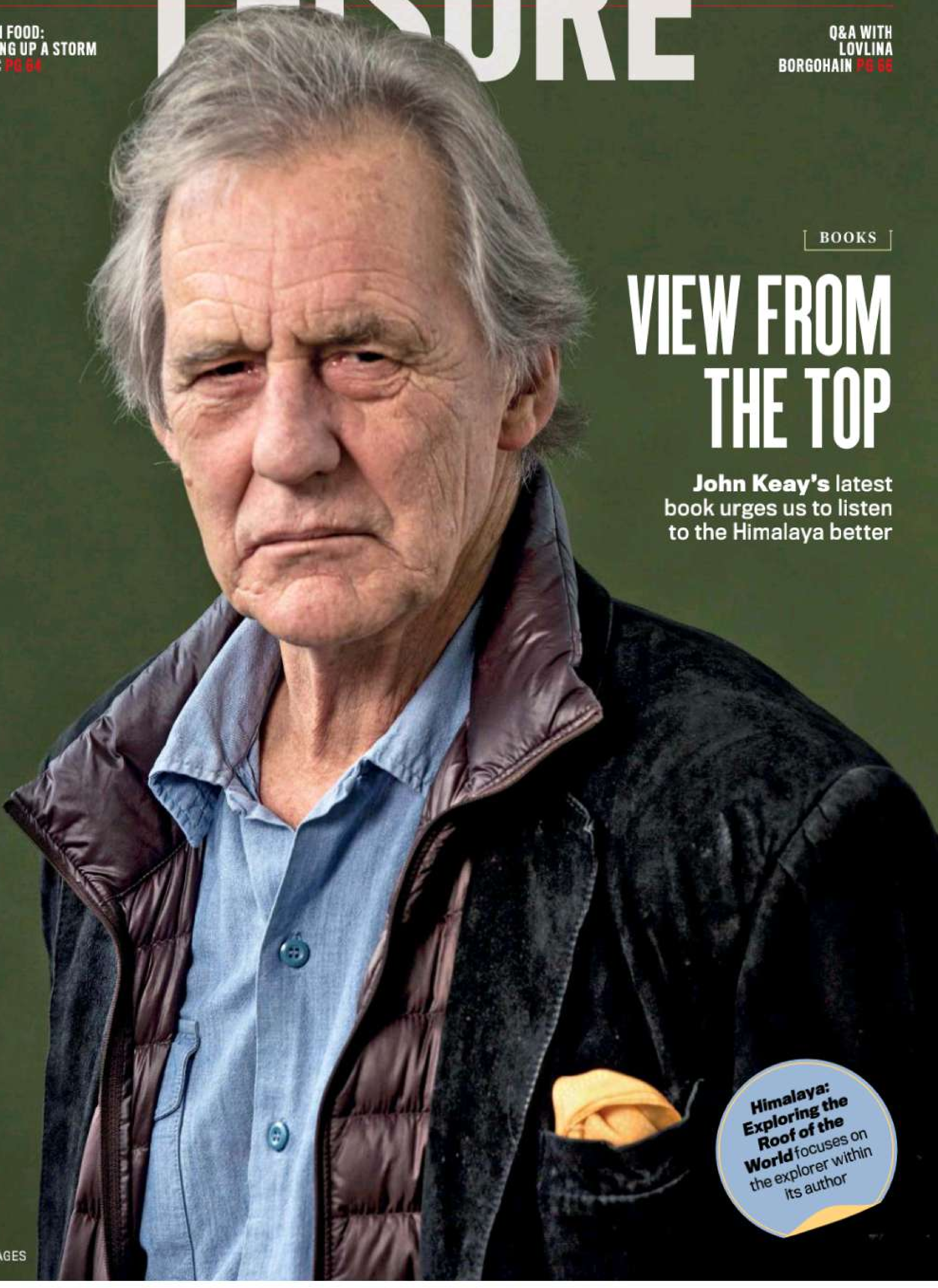
LEISURE

RAILWAYS: COMING TO THE STOP PG 61

MUZAFFAR ALI: MAN OF MANY ARTS PG 62

INDIAN FOOD: COOKING UP A STORM IN NYC PG 64

Q&A WITH LOVLINA BORGOHAIN PG 66



BOOKS

VIEW FROM THE TOP

John Keay's latest book urges us to listen to the Himalaya better

Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World focuses on the explorer within its author

GETTY IMAGES

HIMĀLAYA
Exploring the Roof of the World
JOHN KEAY
BLOOMSBURY

HIMALAYA: EXPLORING THE ROOF OF THE WORLD
by John Keay
BLOOMSBURY
₹699; 432 pages

Though the Hindu Kush-Himalaya mountain complex has been explored, documented and appropriated for 200 years now, it remains a puzzle for most. One must *understand Himalaya for itself*, not merely *in the light of the interests of its periphery*. To do so, one needs confidence and humility. We should look at the known with fresh eyes each time. John Keay's first books—*When Men and Mountains Meet* (1977) and *The Gilgit Game* (1979)—focused on the vignettes and romance of the pioneering explorers of the Himalaya. His latest book, *Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World*, focuses on the explorer within its author.

This one-person encyclopaedic survey begins with a bold but accurate accusation: "History has not been kind to Himalaya", and then provides a narrative that analyses the range of contemporary studies on the Himalaya. Keay guides us through topics such as orogeny (mountain-making), autochthonous cosmologies, botanical secrets, glacial melt rates, even philology and zoology, without abandoning the world of ideas, societies and personalities. The author's criticism is that the world doesn't *listen* to Himalayans. He then shines a light on how this may be done.

Keay's passion and confidence for all things Himalaya were evident in an interview with INDIA TODAY: Zangskar interested him because it was "geology in action"; the need for the scientific study of glaciation is fine, but local communities are "creating their own glaciers successfully in Hunza and Baltistan". He also endorsed the suggestion that there must be a dialogic, not merely instrumentalist, relationship with the Dard, Mon, Lepcha, Limbo, Naga and other indigenes, a task he could not address in an already hefty book.

Himalayan exploration has concentrated on its material curiosities and curious mentalities. But the time has come for it to be mined and protected as a cornucopia of knowledge systems, languages and universal wisdoms, as a "water-tower" for a quarter of humanity, and as a provocation to arrest the trend of selfish territorial grab that passes for geopolitics. Keay's book opens a window to help us adopt these perspectives.

IN JOHN KEAY'S WRITING, WE FIND A HUMILITY THAT'S SORELY NEEDED WHEN APPROACHING THE HIMALAYA

Heed Keay's pithy description of Zangskar and its provenance in Ladakh, for instance: "In a maze of twisting valleys and dark gorges, the granite of the Great Himalaya range here brushes up against the limestone of the Zangskar range." Then, citing Pierre Dézes's hypothesis, he explains that Zangskar may be, in tectonic language, a "pre-Asian" breakaway from Africa. The stunning implication of this: "...cradled in its bosom, Himalaya still hugs a sliver of what was once Africa." In a world inured to the often-facile use of concepts like "interconnectedness" and "interdependence", we are introduced to Ladakh's connectedness to Africa!

Keay tackles more recent knots in the Tibeto-Himalaya with equal flair. The complexities of classifying Tibetan Buddhism's monastic orders; the genesis of the office of the Dalai Lama; the synthesis between Buddhist theory and Bon praxis; and the role of Tibet as a Eurasian power in the 8th century, all are explained unpretentiously and comprehensively. Downright humorous is his untangling of the contemporary factional battle for the ownership of the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim. Just as amusing is Keay's description of the infamous controversy on the timeline for glacial-melt-Armageddon in the Himalaya: it was because of something as innocuous as a misplaced zero that had gone unnoticed by authors, copy editors and experts! All the while the author remains admirably self-effacing.

This is not to say that Keay hesitates to express his opinion. Take his verdict on the Italian Tibetanist Giuseppe Tucci's acquisition of texts and artefacts: "By making off with whatever documents and artefacts he deemed of value, Tucci was not pillaging but conserving." The argument is unfashionable in the face of contemporary academic activism, but Keay opts for context and proportion in his analysis. His response is telling when asked about his exoneration of Tucci and other "difficult" explorer-scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries who accumulated artefacts at the expense of their nativity. "They were not totally wrong," he tells us.

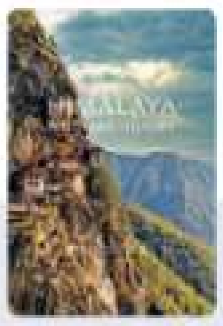
In Keay's writing, we find a humility that is sorely needed when approaching the Himalaya, the seam that both separates and joins Central Eurasia and South Asia. The future of 240 million Himalayans and, indeed, a demography of 1.65 billion more who depend on a conserved Himalaya, make it a subject of urgent universal, not proprietary, importance. ■

Siddiq Wahid

(The author is a Himalayan. He lives in Kashmir and is a professor of Central Eurasian history.)

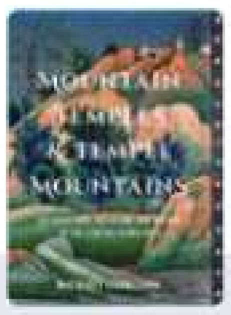
AT CLOSE RANGE

A reader's guide to the 'roof of the world'



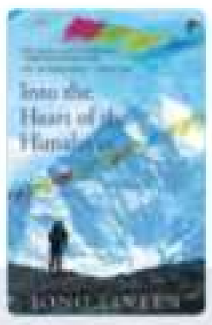
HIMALAYA: A Human History
by Ed Douglas
BODLEY HEAD
₹799; 592 pages

There is very little that Ed Douglas leaves out in this comprehensive history of the Himalaya, but by repeatedly zooming in on the Himalayan people, he narrates a story of resilience we only seldom hear.



MOUNTAIN TEMPLES & TEMPLE MOUNTAINS: Architecture, Religion, and Nature in the Central Himalayas
by Nachiket Chanchani
NIYOGI BOOKS
₹1,600; 284 pages

Given the Ganga's unabating relevance in the Hindu pantheon, the river's Himalayan source is understandably venerated. Chanchani's book shows us how faith can even move mountains.



INTO THE HEART OF THE HIMALAYAS
by Jono Lineen
SPEAKING TIGER
₹499; 336 pages

To cope with the tragic loss of his brother, Jono Lineen trekked across 2,700 km of the Himalaya. His encounters with Pakistani army men, Tibetan lamas and Hindu sadhus all make this memoir absorbing.

COMING TO THE STOP

Vinoo N. Mathur's ode to Indian railway buildings makes you want to ditch the flight for the train

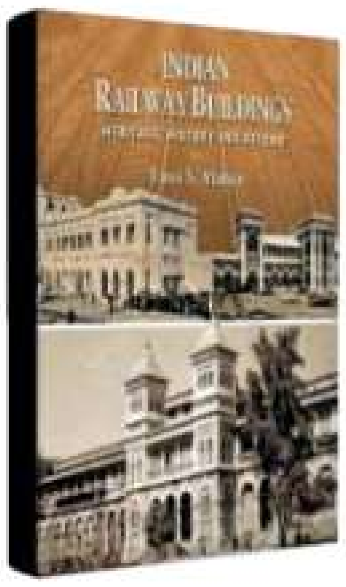
The British in India invested ideologically in the railways, and some of the most grand and monumental structures were colonial railway stations. Anyone interested in buildings cannot but fall in love with this legacy, and Vinoo Mathur, an old railway hand, has done a wonderful job of documentation. The book is a feast of rare archival and other photographs, the text has been meticulously researched and the author's grasp of the formal aspects of western architectural history is truly impressive. And it spans a range that includes chronological development, geographical spread, changing architectural styles, different functional needs—stations, offices, residential quarters, sheds and workshops, schools, hospitals, hotels.

The British themselves saw railway stations as islands of rational rule in the sea of traditional and backward India, examples of structured and regulated public spaces. No doubt these examples of Romanesque, Gothic, Saracenic buildings, complete with domes, arches, turrets and gargoyles, added a touch of the surreal and bizarre to the tropical landscape, but there were a few Indians, poor or rich, rural or urban, who remained unaffected or failed to be charmed. As standalone buildings, the careful planning, formal innovations—Roman temples, Gothic churches, Tudor cottages—appeared repeatedly, and their superb execution (by Indian workers, craftsmen and artisans) is endearing.

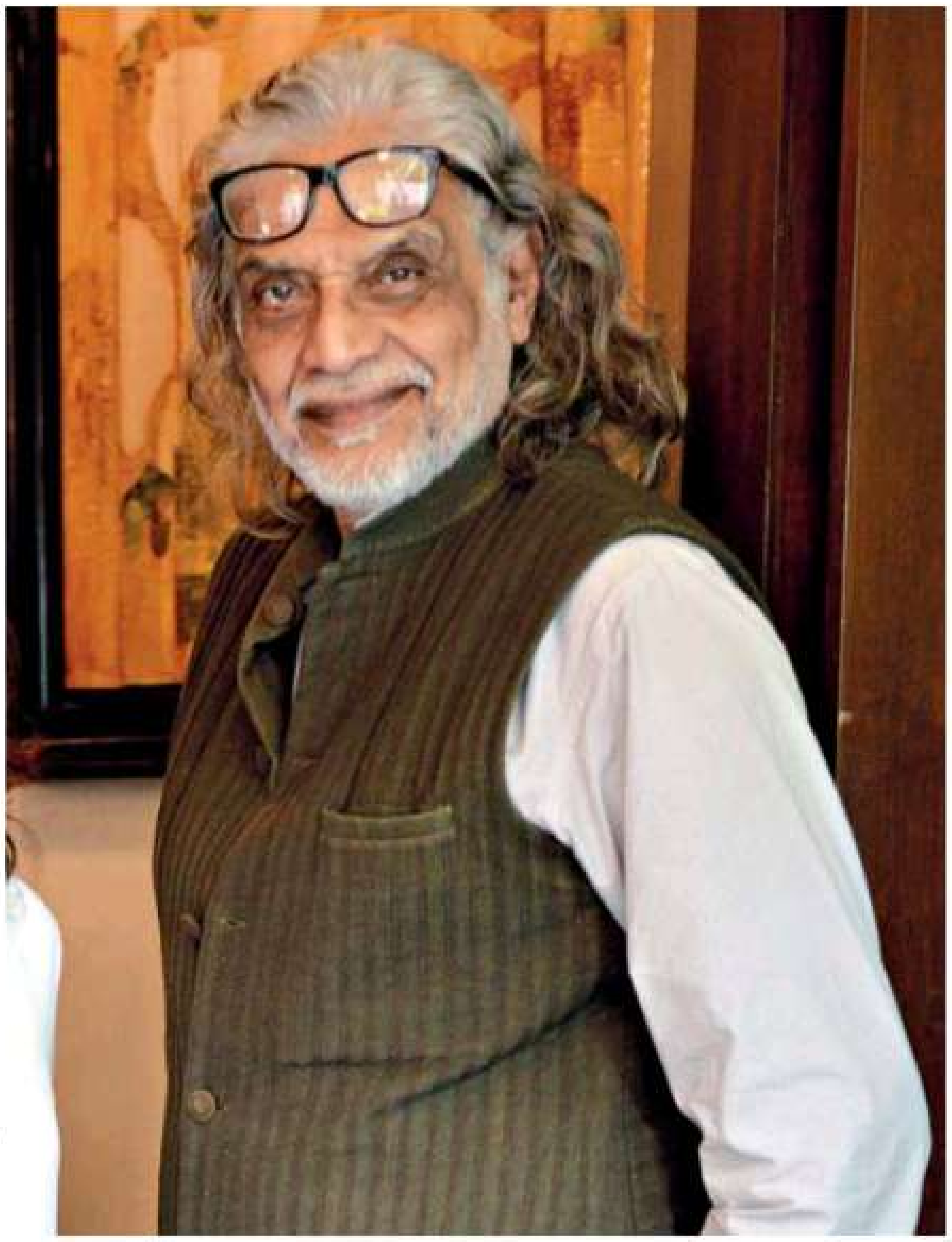
Railways and building activity gathered momentum after North India was reconquered in 1857. The concerns of defence lingered in the planning. Lahore station had bastions—just in case. Delhi, Agra and Lucknow had stations and railway lines cutting across them—these cities would no longer be fortified. Sanitation and land acquisition played a crucial role. Calcutta almost had Barrabazar wiped out so that a station could be built, which eventually happened across the river in Howrah. Railway buildings generated symbolic power and impressed stability and peace. Classical Europe was the model, but the buildings also benefited from innovations in techniques that came with the Industrial Revolution—the vast hangar-like sheds, the span of roofs, iron footbridges, the enormous platforms.

A book so lovingly written is bound to colour the view of British rule as admirable and benign. The author does not hint much at the darker legacy of railways: the spread of malaria, deindustrialisation and economic disruption where new termini replaced thriving marts to facilitate colonial extraction. But his enthusiasm for these architectural marvels will provoke thinking on the challenges of conserving historical buildings that have become integral to Indian culture, especially since there seems to be a trend to obliterate material remains that do not conveniently fit the narrative of contemporary political dispensations. Modern airports with their branded goods outlets and moving walkways can never replace the wonder and joy of the station experience. ■

Partho Datta



INDIAN RAILWAY BUILDINGS: HERITAGE, HISTORY AND BEYOND
by Vinoo N. Mathur
NIYOGI BOOKS
₹2,500; 365 pages

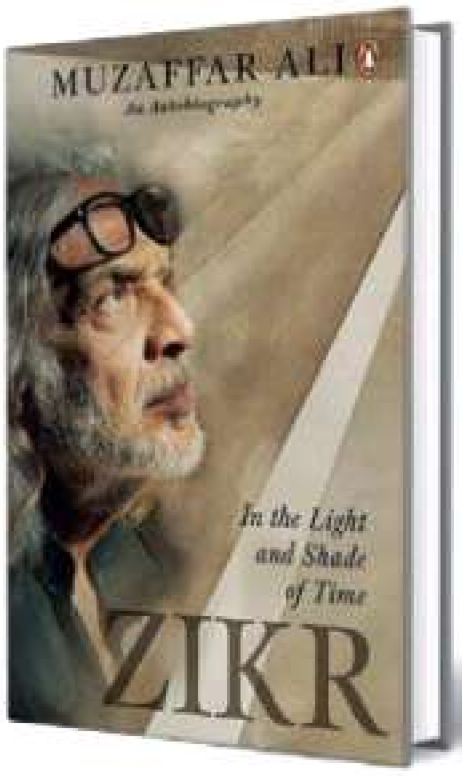

MILIND SHELTE

BOOKS

THE EXTRA MILE

IN **MUZAFFAR ALI'S** MEMOIR, WE SEE THE SUM OF HIS MANY CREATIVE PURSUITS

Muzaffar Ali is a man of many arts. He paints, makes films and runs a fashion house. He also stages music and dance shows and is an aficionado of Urdu poetry. "Everything is connected," he says. "If you don't know poetry, you won't know music. If you don't know either, you don't know dance. And if you don't know body language, you won't know the moving image." Now, with *Zikr: In the Light & Shade of Time*, he wears another hat—that of an author. Perhaps best known for his film *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Ali made use of Covid-19 restrictions to pen the story of his life. Entrenched in Awadh's Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb*, Ali's days have, in a sense, brimmed with creative journeys, but the polymath is not in the habit of imparting words of wisdom.



ZIKR: IN THE LIGHT & SHADE OF TIME
by Muzaffar Ali
PENGUIN VINTAGE
₹699; 264 pages

"Like many other things I write about here, I don't recommend that anyone do this," he writes. Instead, he lets poets be the experts, the voices of both beauty and intellect. By quoting them seamlessly, Ali makes his case for a more "poetry-driven" country. Be it Faiz Ahmed Faiz, one of his biggest inspirations, or Shahryar, his most frequent collaborator, the book makes one appreciate often unread verse. "These poets made me who I am," he says. "They were, at different points of time, a part of my being, and in different times, have explained life to me."

Apart from poets, another life coach was Ali's father, Raja S. Sajid Hussain of Kotwara. He had packed him off to Aligarh to study and get rid of the "feudal fragrance" he was raised in. The chapter Ali dedicates to Aligarh in *Zikr* is altogether lovely. The city "moved me to feel and think", writes Ali as he documents the beginning of his love affair with poetry, and packs in many delightful anecdotes. He says, "If you step into Aligarh and don't see a whole *pitaara* [trove] of humour, you may as well walk out of it. It's a strain of humour which has helped me in my daily life." In *Zikr*, Ali also takes us to Calcutta, where he'd work with the legend Satyajit Ray at the ad agency Clarion McCann. We see him move briefly to Delhi and finally arrive in Bombay, where he'd have an 11-year association with Air India before jumping into the world of films.

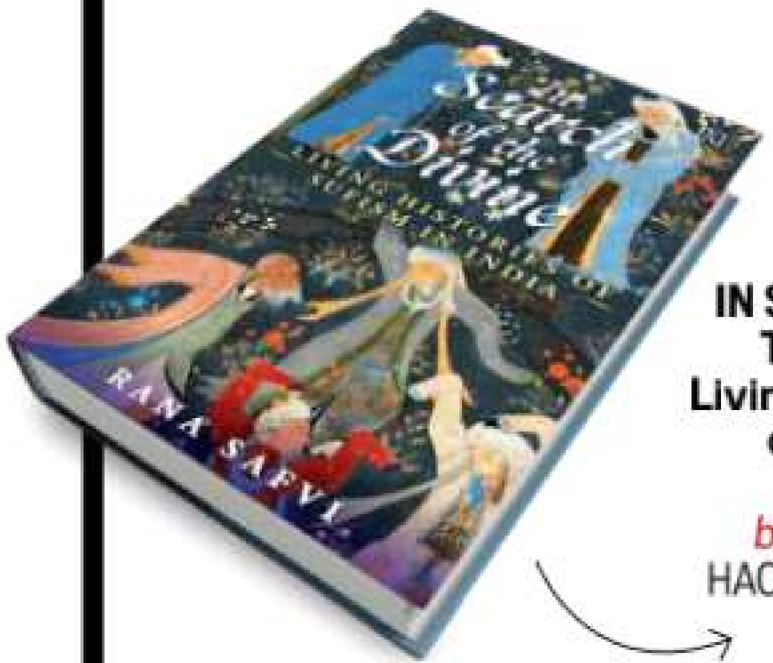
What stands out, though, is Ali's yearning for a bygone Lucknow. He writes, "The city went from a peaceful and culturally rich setting to one whose fine arts and cultural values underwent an ugly degeneration... Will we always be oblivious to the culture of sensitivity and refinement for which Lucknow has been known the world over?" Ali highlights the two Lucknows he grew up in. One reminds him of his father, for it was "intellectual and humanist", and the other he associates with his mother Kaniz Hyder for its "feminine and feudal" characteristics. Ali, notably, seems reluctant in talking about his own roles as a husband and father. He shares professional details more freely than private ones.

An outsider in Bollywood, Ali devotes a chapter each to five films: *Gaman* (1978), *Umrao Jaan*, *Agaman* (1982), *Anjuman* (1986) and *Zooni*, which was never released. Here he details his artistic adventures, emphasising music as much as he does production design and costumes. Though he touches upon how the feminine became a forte of his work, he doesn't elaborate on why. In hindsight, he attributes it to women's "deeper continuity of culture", which is integral to his own "way of expressing things". Some might also find unnecessary his penchant for possessions. Letting go of his father's car, an Isotta Fraschini, is hard and there is joy in getting horses. "Muzaffar Ali, the person, is a foolish child," he says. "I love things that are beautiful... They keep me amused. I see things a little extra." That "extra", though, has led to an artist who is aware of his own pitfalls. Ali talks about the struggle of separating a creative pursuit from commercial trappings and reflects on his failures. "I have not compromised. I left things when I found I was being trapped," he says. As he distanced himself from the "cauldron of insecurity and ugliness" that Bollywood can often be, he was swept by Sufism, the "creative rudder" that liberates him. At 78, Ali paints and feels that he still has a film in him. He also designs and collaborates with musicians and dancers. "Just don't call me a jack of all trades," he pleads with a laugh. ■

Suhani Singh

TREADING THE SUFI'S PATH

RANA SAFVI's new book is a work of thorough scholarship but it is also a labour of love



IN SEARCH OF THE DIVINE: Living Histories of Sufism in India
by Rana Safvi
HACHETTE INDIA
₹599; 432 pages

The minute one thinks of Sufism, writes scholar Rana Safvi in her book, one that is both descriptive and interpretative, "the two strong images that come to mind are qawwalis and Melvana Jalaluddin Rumi's mystical verses". The qawwali, developed in the 13th century by Amir Khusro, is embedded in our popular culture and was once a must-have in every Bollywood movie. Rumi, founder of the Mevlavi Sufi (1207-1273), was a poet and scholar, described by the *New Yorker* as "the bestselling poet in the United States". His couplets feature in the albums of artistes as varied as Chris Martin of Coldplay and Madonna.

IN SEARCH OF THE DIVINE includes a chapter on women Sufis and the contribution of women to Sufism

Coleman Baker, Rumi's translator, recites this from Rumi in one of Coldplay's albums: "*This being human is a guest house/ Every morning a new arrival/ A joy, a depression, a meanness,/ some momentary awareness comes/ as an unexpected visitor.*" But, of course, there is more to Sufism than qawwalis and Rumi, and Safvi's meticulous research gives us a view of both its depth and width.

When a system communicates largely in similes and metaphors, it is either misunderstood or it invites different interpretations. Asked to explain the highest form of religious devotion, the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti said, "Develop a river-like generosity, sun-like bounty an earth-like hospitality." Most religions gain strength from the poetic nature of their utterances; there is both beauty and richness in this. But there is also the scope for ambiguity.

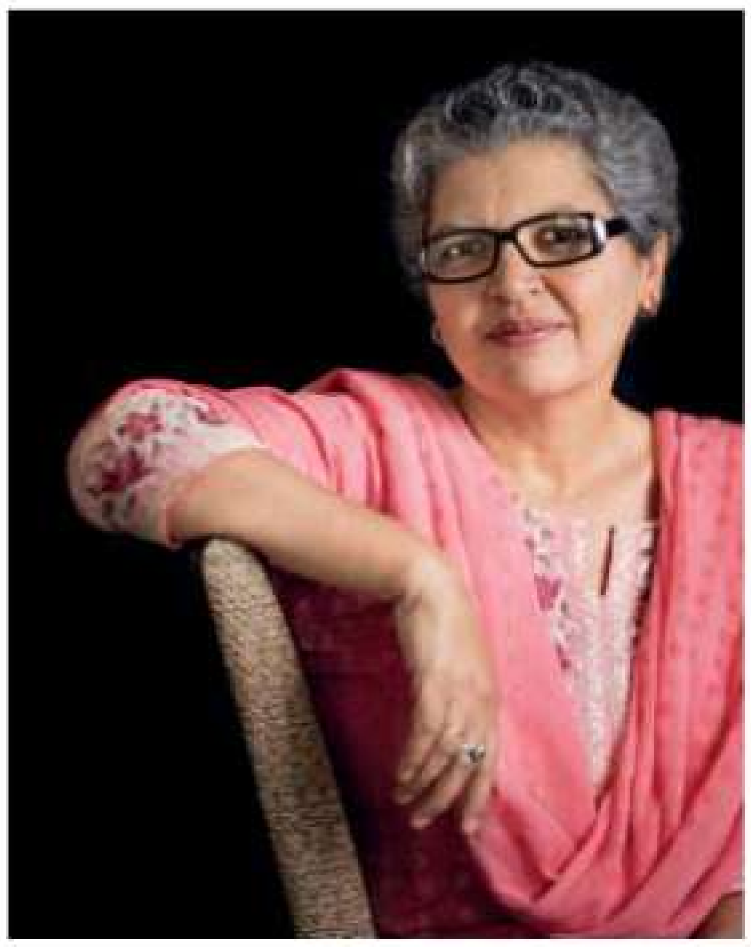
Safvi clarifies some of the misconceptions surrounding the term 'Sufi' and traces the origins of Sufism and its spread in India through two streams: history and legend on the one hand, and personal experiences on the other. The latter includes "field visits to the dargahs across India". She brings to this task the rigour of a scholar and the awareness of a populariser. The result is an erudite, depth-seeking tome that also serves as an introductory volume to the precepts and practices of Sufism.

"Sufism," says Safvi, "is a vast ocean of mystical thoughts, doctrines, literature and poetry, and a legacy of its saints." It has always been a part of Islam, although Orientalists of the 19th century saw it as something distinct from it. Sufism both contributed to and absorbed from India's syncretic culture. It also went through the occasional dip. During one such dip, Persian scholar Abu Al-Hasan Fushanja wrote, "Sufism today is a name without a reality, whereas it was once a reality without a name."

Today, it is both a name and a reality, something the author captures well. As the Sufi mystics came to India and settled down here, they were influenced by the local Hinduism. There was a great and constant cross-fertilisation of ideas, says Safvi.

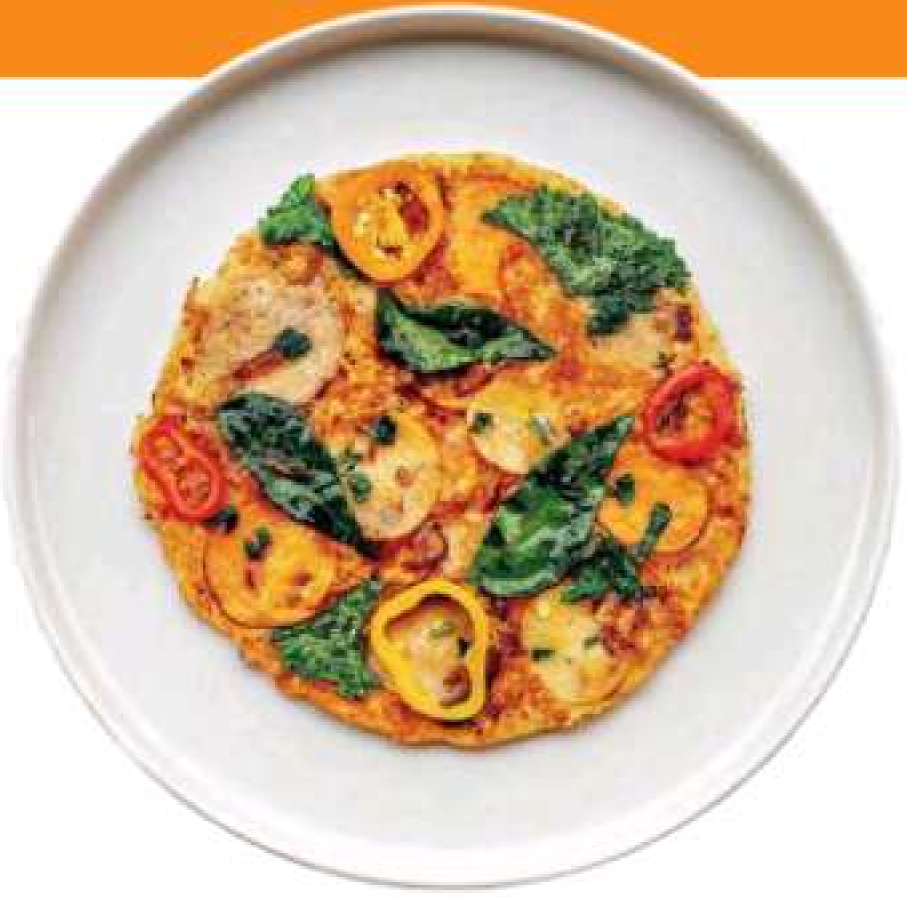
In Search of the Divine is clearly a labour of love and includes a chapter on women Sufis and the contribution of women to Sufism. However, there are dargahs where even today women are not allowed. The patriarchy is deep-rooted, but occasionally shows signs of loosening its grip. ■

Suresh Menon



Indian at its Best

A group of restaurants is cooking up a storm in NYC by catering to the Indian palate



IF **a visitor from the US came** to India looking for *kudal varuval* (spiced goat intestines), one might point them to a locally famous pitstop, possibly beside a tyre repair shop along the highway. Or, perhaps, to the home of a friend, where the labour-intensive dish is a house specialty. Or one could tell them to head to New York, where a heap of soft and spicy *kudal varuval* features prominently on the menu at Semma, currently the only Indian restaurant in the city with a Michelin star, which it won this October.

"I don't think what's happening can be planned," says Roni Mazumdar, the restaurateur behind Semma and Unapologetic Foods, a mini-empire of Indian restaurants in the city. Outside, a line of people waiting for the doors to open begins to form. "As a matter of fact," Mazumdar says, "I'm not even sure we fit into the category of Michelin."

Mazumdar isn't being humble—that's not his style—nor is he off the mark. "If we'd set out to get a Michelin star, we could have done a tasting menu with [Semma's chef-partner] Vijay Kumar and it would have had every molecular gastronomy and modernisation you could think of." Instead, Mazumdar is acutely self-aware of being part of a transformation in the way the world understands Indian food and, by extension, the heterogeneity

BEYOND TIKKA MASALA

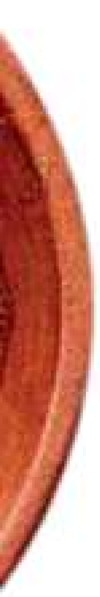
Notable Indian restaurants around the USA

➻ Badmaash

Going strong since 2013, Badmaash, now with two Los Angeles locations, is Indian fusion gastropub cuisine at its stoner finest. Think chicken tikka poutine and butter chicken samosa, along with more traditional home-style curries.

➻ Besharam

Chef Heena Patel ditches non-vegetarian cuisine at her California-inflected, Gujarati speciality restaurant, with dishes inspired by Ahmedabad, Surat, Vadodara and Mumbai. A cocktail called Patel's Passion, and 'Impossible' meat samosas? Only in San Francisco.



of the Indian diaspora.

Mazumdar and his partners are among a new crop of restaurateurs and chefs who are unapologetic about cooking Indian dishes for Indian tastes. Inadvertently, they've won over non-Indian diners, who have never tasted food like this before. While these restaurants now routinely win coveted awards abroad, it also signals a shift, for Indians, from an obsession with “all things ‘foreign’”, as Mazumdar puts it. Finally, Indians are starting to move away from the idea that until our food is “noticed by other people… it's not worthy; “we believe it's pedestrian. As if it doesn't require any effort, desire, emotions, artistry”.

Roni Mazumdar is acutely self-aware of being part of a transformation in the way the world understands Indian food and diaspora

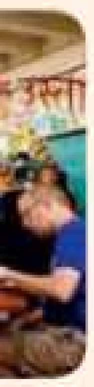
The food at Semma and other Unapologetic Foods restaurants walks a smart line between novelty and authenticity. For example, one of the most popular dishes is *nathai pirattal*, ginger-tamarind snails served with mini kal dosa, an appetiser that Kumar admits he would likely not be talking about if he were back in India. After joining Unapologetic Foods from Rasa (a California restaurant that won a Michelin star), Kumar “casually” recounted to Mazumdar and chef Chintan Pandya, co-owner of Unapologetic Foods, how as a kid he used to collect snails for the pot. “Roni and Chintan looked at each other and were like, ‘This should be on the menu!’ I said, ‘You both are crazy.’ They replied, ‘New Yorkers will love this.’” They were right.

It's a different world from a decade or so ago, when Mazumdar opened his first restaurant, Masalawala, as a retirement project for his food-obsessed father. Back then, Indian cuisine abroad was still defined by ‘tikka masala’, and even Mazumdar had to compromise. It was only when Pandya, an Oberoi-trained chef with an interest in recipe-hunting, joined him that the two found the courage to open the casual restaurant Adda, regional specialist Dhamaka, fried chicken joint Rowdy Rooster, a couple of catering concerns and, most recently, the new Bengal-centric Masalawala in Brooklyn, where rather than *tikka masala* you'll find *bhapa ilish* on the menu. “We'll tell you it has a tonne of bones. If you don't want it, just don't order it,” says Mazumdar. “That's what the whole essence of Unapologetic is. I'm sick and tired of apologising as if we're so desperately trying to fit into someone else's mould.”

And so there is space at Semma for Kumar's childhood memories of rural Tamil Nadu, and at Adda for Pandya's beloved chilli cheese toast. Interestingly, there's no beef on the menus, and the only pork dish is *doh khleh* (a Khasi specialty made of pig's head) at Dhamaka. But besides the intestines and snails, there's goat neck, goat belly *seekh*, *tabak maaz*, *gurda kapoora*, *bheja fry*, venison, *paya*, *kaleji* and, of course, that bone-in hilsa. And there's plenty for vegetarians, too. “If we're going to talk about food as an expression, then it also comes with a certain level of vulnerability,” says Mazumdar. With each restaurant, “we wanted to embrace the heritage of each one of these individuals and have a very clear point of view.” Even within India, such pluralistic visions of cuisine in a fine restaurant setting are rare. ■

Sonal Shah

➻ Chai Pani



This “chaat house” in Asheville is the cornerstone of the American South's Indian food juggernaut. The emphasis is on street food and thalis. The eateries in North Carolina and Georgia serve everything from Irani café cuisine, to Carolina barbecue, to piri piri chicken—they even have their own spice company, Spicewalla.

➻ Junoon

After a successful decade in New York (including eight years of being Michelin-starred), this iconic Indian restaurant reopened in a new location last summer.

➻ Ghee

Ghee in Florida lives up to its hearty name, with dishes like yellowfin tuna bhel and short rib dosa on the menu. Its claim to fame is as a farm-to-table phenom, with much of the produce sourced from chef-owner Niven Patel's own two-acre farm.

by Sonal Shah

Q+A

PUNCHING ABOVE HER WEIGHT

With an Olympic bronze in her kitty, **Lovlina Borgohain** recently won a gold medal at the Asian Elite Boxing Championships in Amman. Competing in a new weight category, she seems ready for every new challenge

Q. You faced criticism about your performance post the Tokyo Olympics. Did it get you down?
I felt bad, but the truth is that I was struggling with form and I was unable to focus on training. I also had to change my weight category from 69 to 75 kg [as the 69 kg division was not included in Paris 2024] and that took time to adjust to. I tried to take [the criticism] positively. It's only when the going gets tough that you grow and learn.

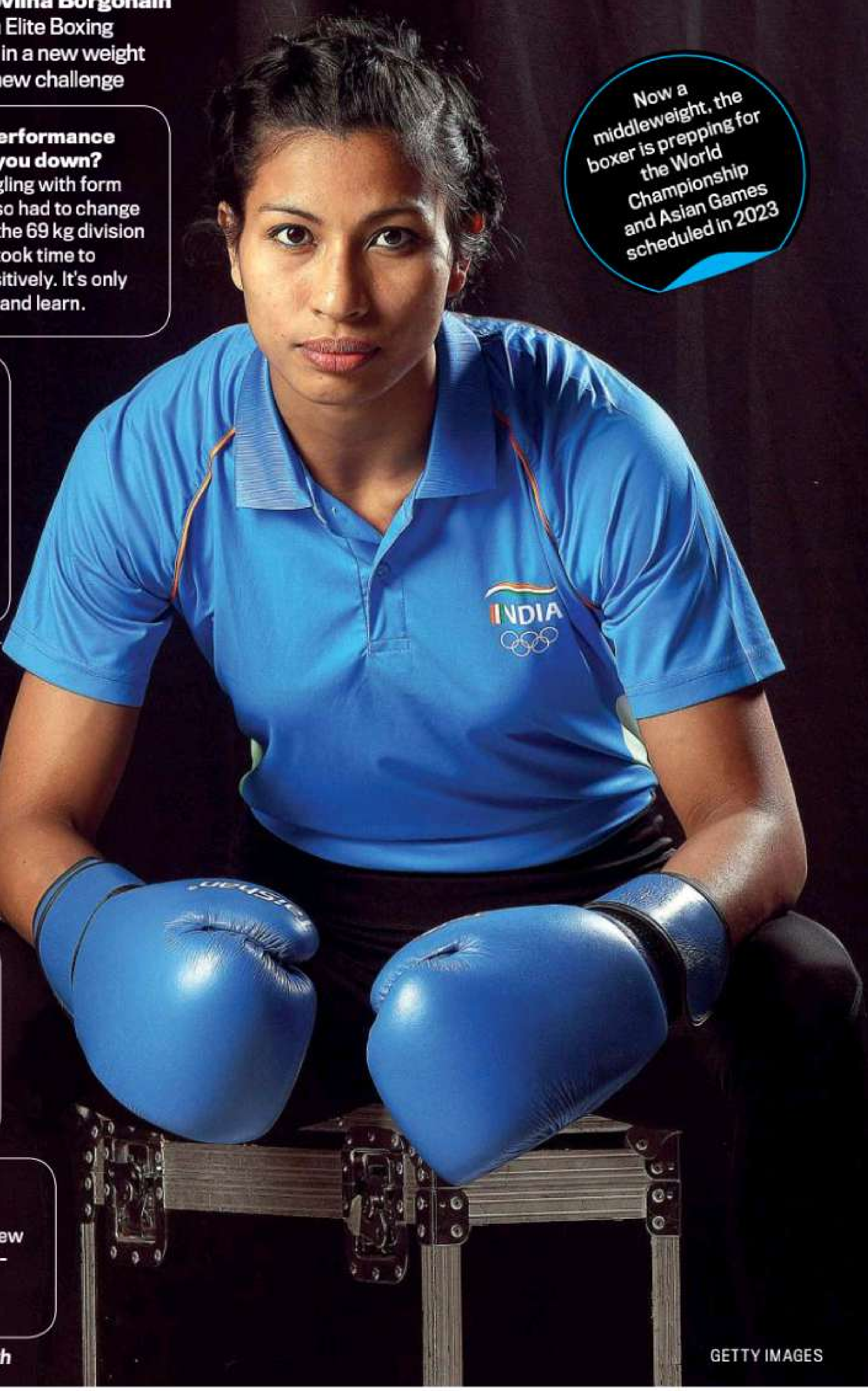
Q. Competing in a new weight category isn't easy...
It's easier to reduce weight and compete. Boxers in a higher weight category have more strength and therefore, the power of their punch is that much more. Also, when your body becomes heavier, your speed is affected, you get tired quicker and there are nutrition changes, too.

Q. Has winning gold helped boost your morale?
I gained a lot of confidence. My previous two competitions weren't that great. I just have two years to qualify for the Olympics and every tournament matters for preparation. Post the Olympics, the expectations are that much more, and being both calm and patient is important.

Q. How much has life changed post Tokyo?
Earlier, people didn't know about us. Now, you must be very conscious of what you do. Going to public places is also harder. Everybody is watching, so you can't do some things freely.

Q. What's your target for 2023?
The aim is to do well in each competition. The World Championship will be held in New Delhi next year, so that is a great opportunity to excel. The Asian Games are also very important.

with Suhani Singh



Now a middleweight, the boxer is prepping for the World Championship and Asian Games scheduled in 2023

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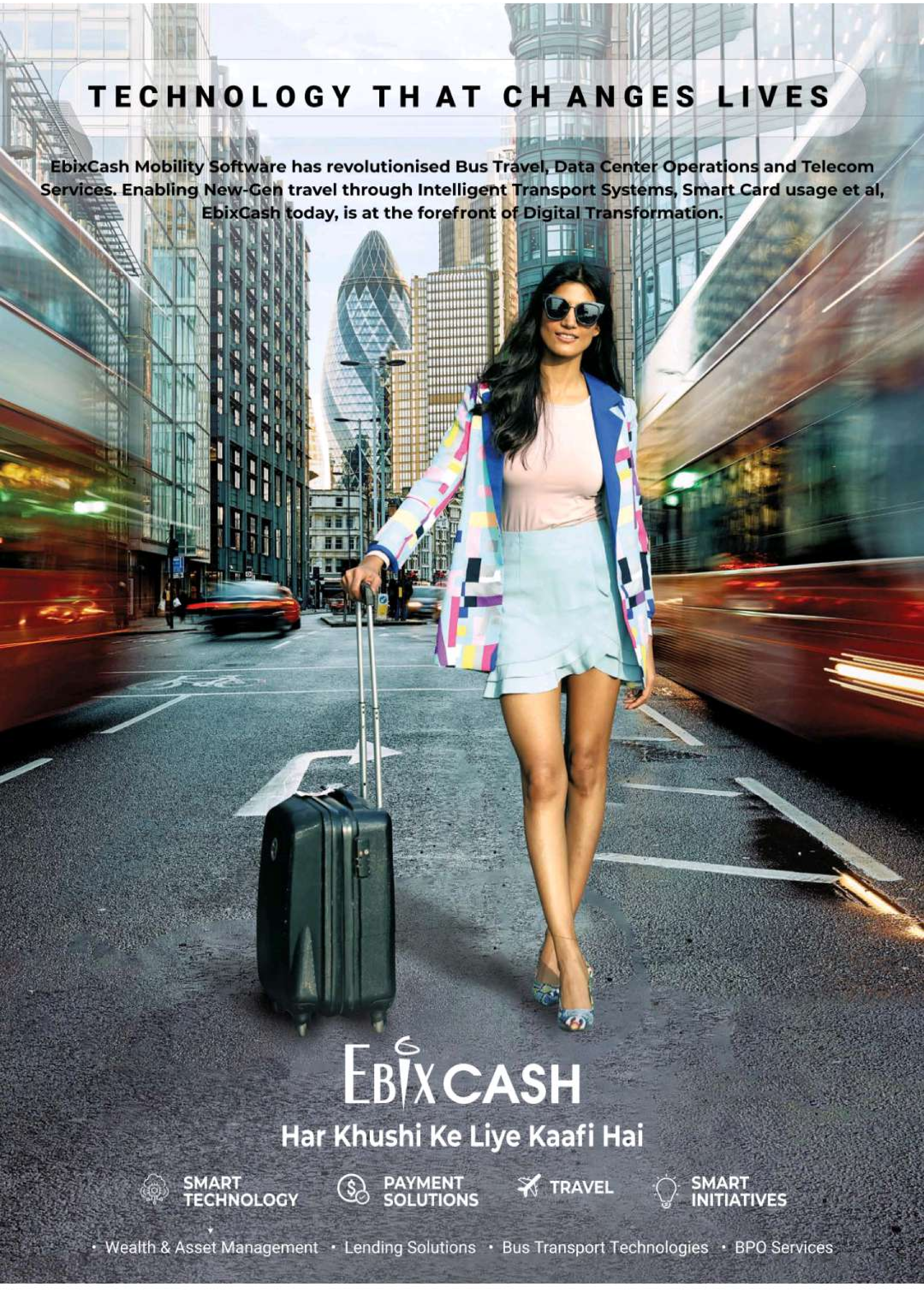

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NOVEMBER 2022

Qayaam Gah is a Sufi-themed luxury retreat in Srinagar, Kashmir

MIXOLOGY
WHY AGAVE IS LEADING THE CHARGE OF WHITE SPIRITS

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BEST GOLFING DESTINATIONS IN ASIA

The Great Escape

OUT-OF-THE-BOX HOLIDAYS ARE THE NEW NORMAL

post send by (KARISHNA JI)

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

EXISTENTIAL CURIOSITY APART, THE FLEETING NATURE of life has never been in question. But when it defines your business model, it's somewhat novel. 700,000 Heures is the world's first ephemeral hotel. The fact that we will spend only about 700,000 hours on the planet is the raison d'être behind this pioneering adventure that began in 2020, with a mission to create transformative experiences. It's a moveable feast of hotels, in a sense, where every six months, it uproots to re-establish in a new destination, where they set up shop in a quirky structure—it could be a tree house, a palace or even a houseboat.

Disruptive as it sounds, the rise of the non-hotel format is one of the biggest trends in hospitality now. No wonder hotels can no longer solely rely on oversized penthouses or unimpeachable service as a clincher. Instead, it's all about providing the most exclusive experiences, changing the way one perceives a hotel. As the New York Times sums up the experience of 700,000 Heures: "The idea is that a hotel is not an actual structure, but a state of mind, a series of experiences, a respite from your life. It's about what you can get out of a destination."

According to an October 2021 report commissioned by Airbnb and produced by Economic Impact, 79 per cent of Indian travellers want to travel in ways that benefit communities both economically and socially, and opt for 'unique' accommodation options, which the vacation rental platform defines, interestingly as 'barn, boat, castle, campsite, hut, island, plane, shepherd's hut, train, treehouse, windmill and yurts', none of which include the word hotel. According to Amanpreet Bajaj, General Manager Airbnb for India, "In India alone, from 2019 to 2021, nights booked at unique properties on Airbnb increased by over 30 per cent." In fact, Airbnb now offers an official "off-grid" category.

This is one of the latest luxury travel trends that calls out to 'extreme escapism'. ***Spice's*** special travel issue helps you to get lost, while finding yourself. In this post-ostentation age, the 'cool tribe' that is shaping mainstream luxury travel is the 'global gypset' [jetsetting gypsy] that want a holiday with achievement—a break from the humdrum comfort zone. Long bike rides, epic walks, ultra-running, pilgrimage, swimming treks, taking plant medicine in the Peruvian Amazon, or riding a horse through Patagonia.

It's all about combining personal passions with travel for a more integrated lifestyle. Just like golfing holidays provide more than par for the course by including access to state-of-the-art wellness facilities and other competitive pursuits. Join ***Spice***'s tee party across five of the best 'stay & play,' golf resorts in Asia to head for this winter.

If slinking away with your golfing buddies seems too hedonistic, indulge your senses at Qayaam Gah instead. This sufi-themed luxury retreat nestled in the Zabarwan Hills of Srinagar, is the perfect escape from the crush of city life. With just seven keys, Qayaam Gah is as exclusive as it gets. "In the spiritual symbolism of Sufism, qayaam signifies the highest mystical state--the experience of unity with everything, the conscious and unbroken enjoyment of the oneness of life," explains the owner Altaf Chapri.

There are plenty of other stories elsewhere in the issue to hold your attention—in Philadelphia, for example, where we chose to retire at The Guild House, listed by ***Travel & Leisure*** as one of the world's best new hotels in 2022. It isn't everyday that you can holler through a hole at a hotel's entrance door or walk in with no concierge or elevator in sight. There's just an old-fashioned dumbwaiter on which you load your bags for one of the 12 rooms.

With a dash of old-world luxury, ***Spice's*** fun-fest trawls the top tables for Indian food in London with new restaurants such as Chourangi and Manthan in Mayfair. As ever, our travel roster is a heady mix of soul and spice.

(Aroon Purie)

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जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से, कहीं भी, कभी भी

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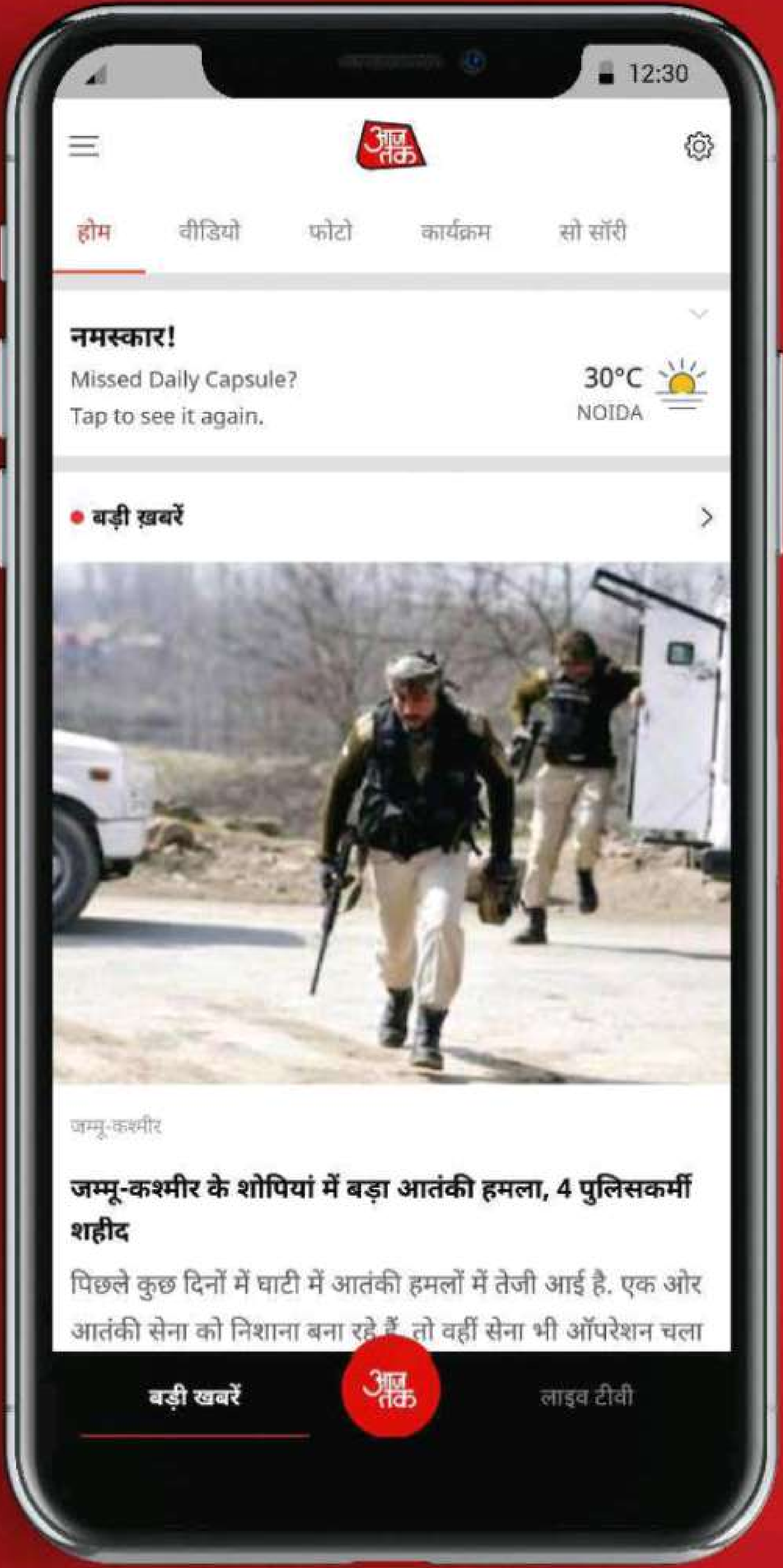
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जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

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THE NON-HOTEL FORMAT IS SHAKING UP THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

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LOCATION QAYAAM GAH; **IMAGE COURTESY** ALTAF CHAPRI

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Photo: PREETI VERMA LAL

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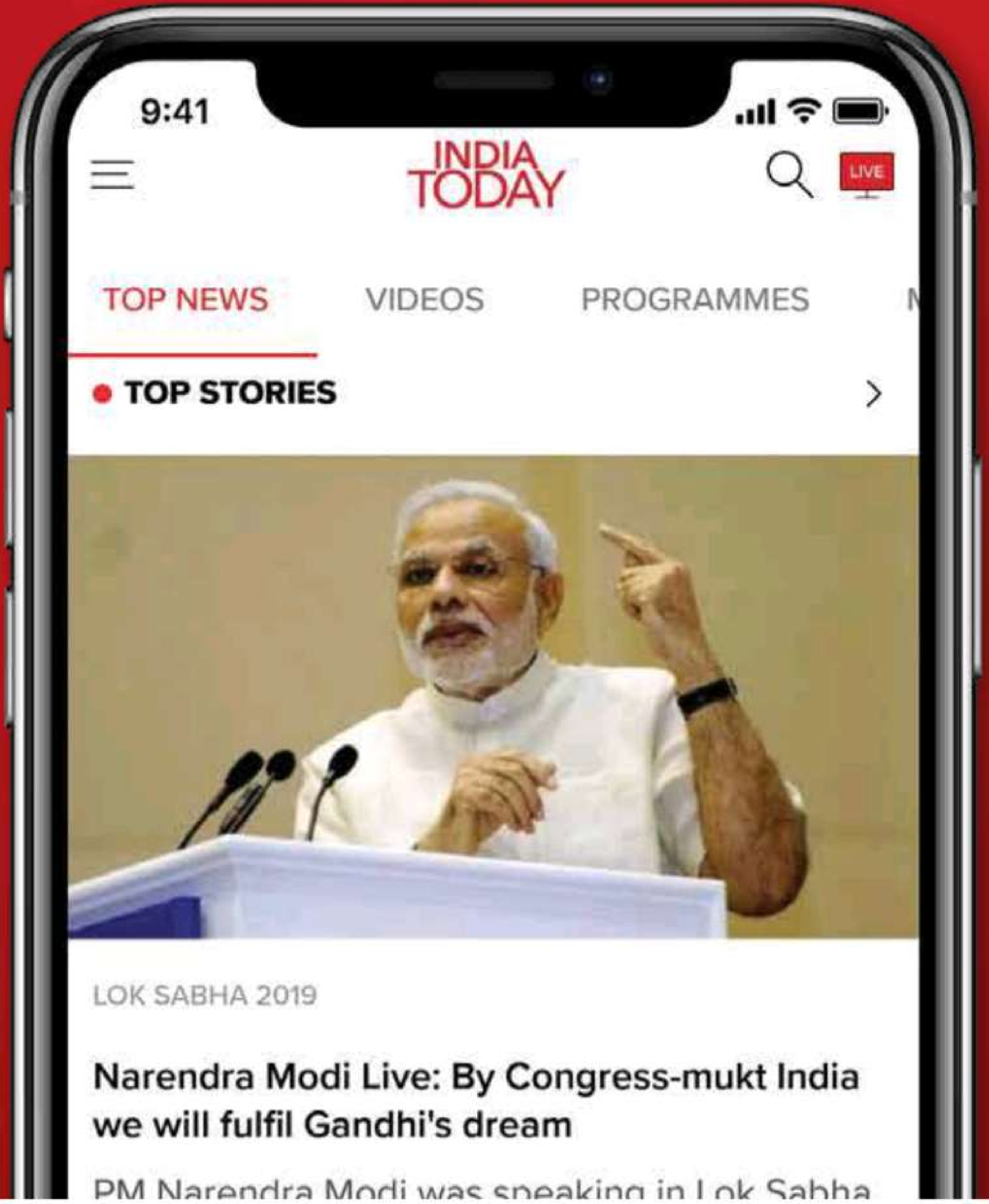
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Narendra Modi Live: By Congress-mukt India we will fulfil Gandhi's dream

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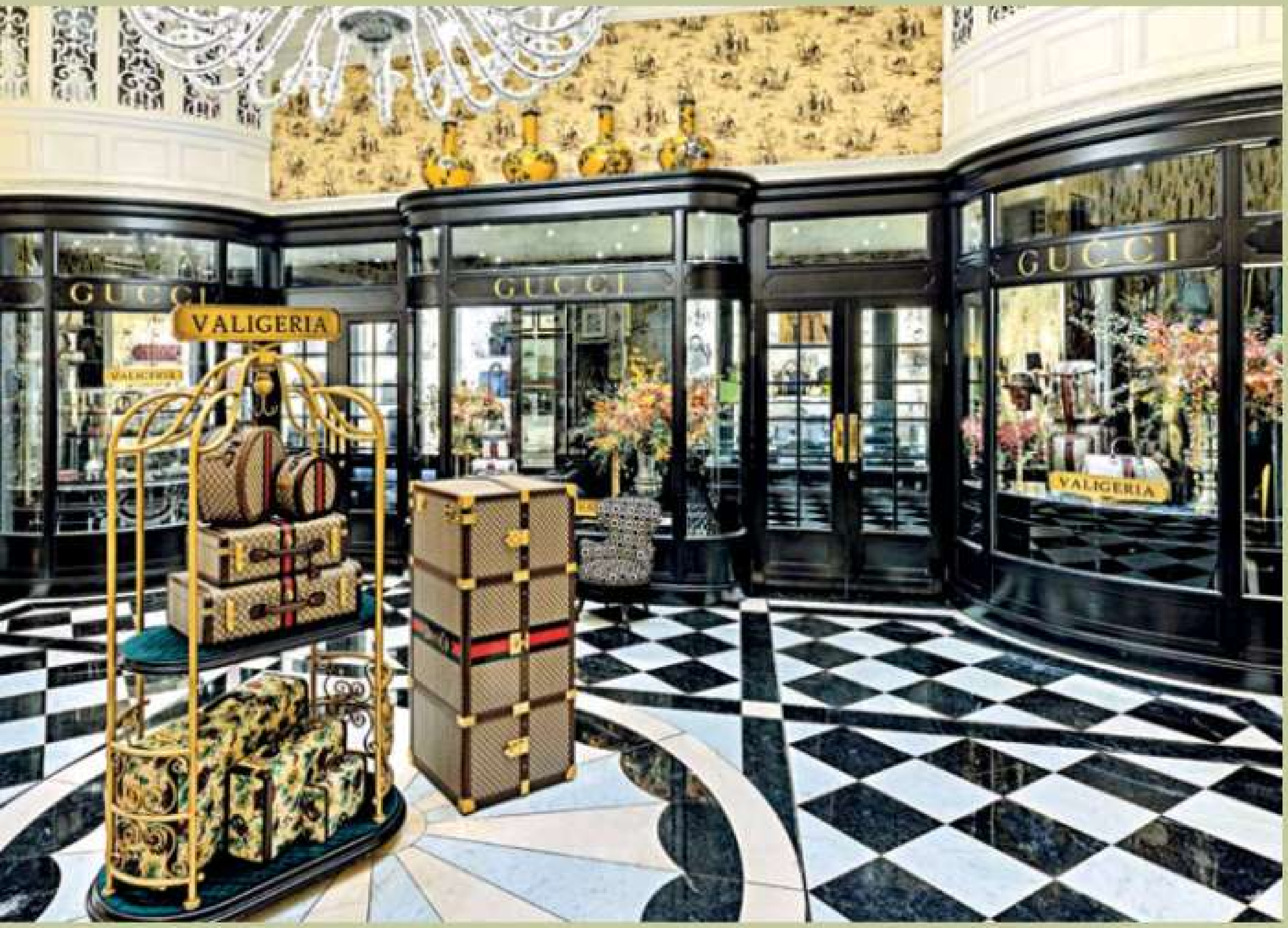


History is in Vogue

Gucci's travel origins date back to the late 1800s when young Guccio Gucci travelled to London and worked as a porter at The Savoy–the then go-to destination for the international jet set. So it feels almost scripted that the historic brand should dedicate an ephemeral space entirely to the world of travel entitled Gucci Valigeria at The Savoy.

Housed at the Savoy, this special Gucci space underlines an exquisitely-curated selection from Gucci's travel offerings including trunks, trolleys, duffle bags, suitcases, garment bags, and other smaller styles, many of which are part of the heritage Gucci Savoy collection. It also displays pieces from the Gucci Lifestyle line, which include travel sets and stationery to pet accessories. All the items will be available for purchase through an omnichannel experience.

Of course, this space is part of an ongoing collaborative narrative with the Savoy, which witnessed the transformation of The Savoy's Royal Suite with furniture, furnishings, and decorative items from the Gucci Décor collection as part of the House's centennial celebrations in 2021. The most attractive feature though: Their recent campaign featuring Ryan Gosling. Not everything beautiful is age-refined.

By Chumki Bharadwaj

THE ART OF CRAFT
The Gucci Savoy collection is part of the House's wider Gucci Valigeria travel selection with a combination of heritage-infused design elements

HOTSHEET

PICK OF THE MONTH

Chloé
Chloé
ROSE NATURELLE INTENSE
100%
PARFUM D'ORIGINE NATURELLE
NATURAL ORIGIN FRAGRANCE
EAU DE PARFUM INTENSE
RECHARGEABLE - REFILLABLE
3.3 FL OZ e 100 ml

Au Naturel

With one eye on lowering the impact on the environment, Chloé's new fragrance Chloé Rose Naturelle uses natural ingredients. The new version, Chloé Rose Naturelle Intense is formulated with 100 per cent natural-origin fragrance, alcohol, and water, without artificial colourants and is vegan. That's future forward and present perfect.

Price ₹11,900 (100ml);
Availability Sephora and Shoppers Stop

COFFEEZA
MYSORE NUGGETS
COFFEEZA
CARAMEL
COFFEEZA
COFFEEZA
HAZELNUT
COFFEEZA
VANILLA

The Kick-er

Leading brand of coffee capsules and machines in India, Coffeeza, has switched from plastic to recyclable aluminum coffee capsules and launched of three new flavoured coffee capsules: Vanilla, Caramel and Hazelnut, along with a premium South-Indian speciality coffee called Mysore Nuggets. It's time to wake up and smell the coffee.

Price upwards of ₹12,999 (Coffeeza's Finero Next Machine);
Coffee capsule blends ₹500 (box of 10)
Availability Coffeeza.com; Amazon, Croma, Nature's Basket

Limited Edition

Not your usual rum of the mill, Camikara–from the house of Piccadily Distilleries–is one-of-a-kind. Made from pure cane juice, it has come to India, after being matured for 12 years in American oak casks. Bottled at a strength of 50 pr cent ABV, it has no added colour, caramel, sugar or flavours, making it a 100 per cent naturally-aged rum. But only a limited quantity of individually numbered bottles will be released worldwide, with India's share at 400 bottles.

Price ₹6,200; **Availability** Retail Stores

CAMIKARA
RUM
CASK 12YO

Green Goddess

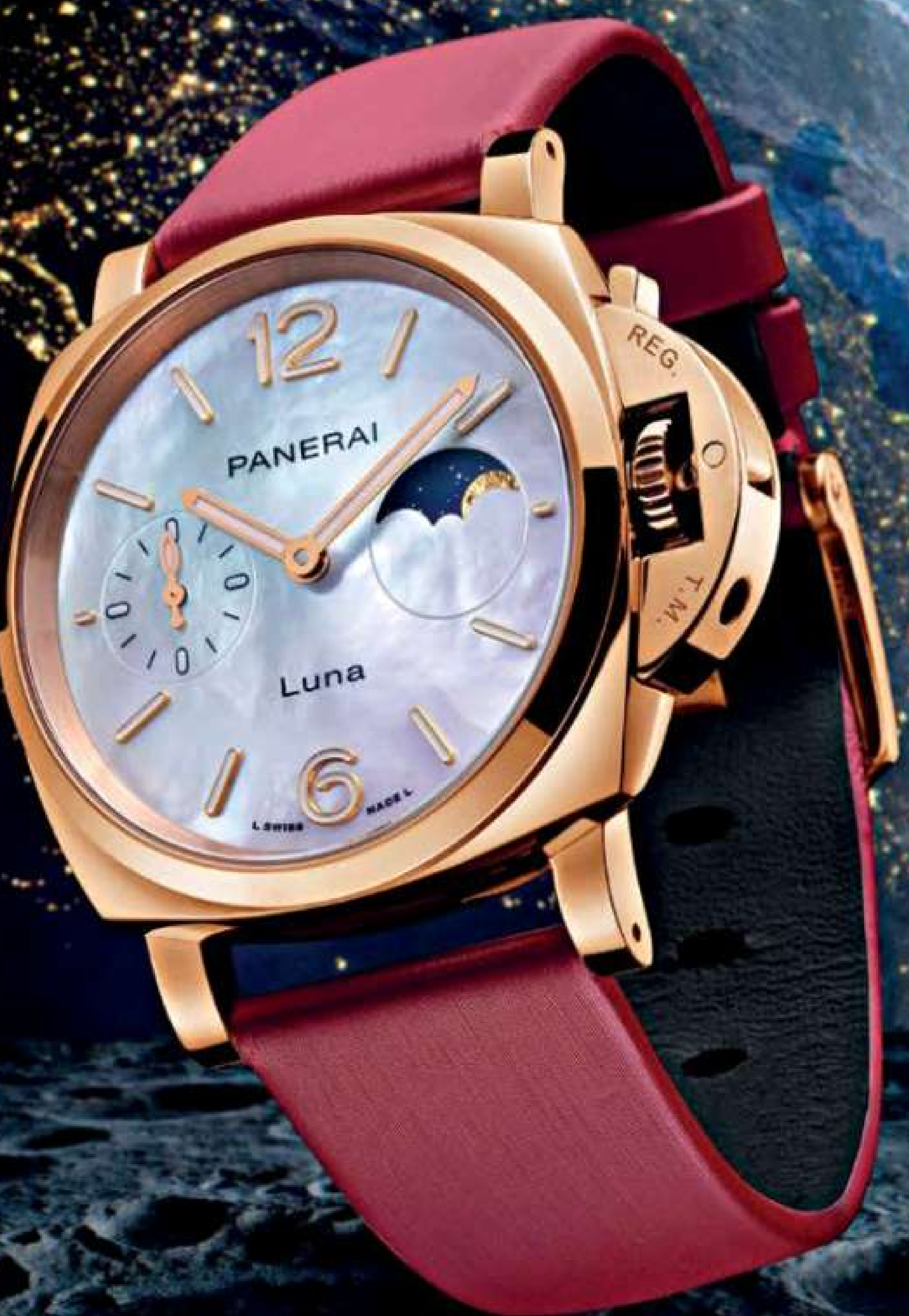
The House of Meraki x Gemfields J'aime collection is the mot magnificent way to go green. The curated selection uses responsibly-sourced emeralds from Gemfields' Kagem mine in Zambia and have been handmade in House of Meraki's London atelier. Envy is a green trinket.

Price From £920 to £14,820;
Availability farfetch.com; net-a-porter.com; houseofmeraki.com

OVER THE MOON

Shooting for the moon may be a tall ask; probably not for the Luminor Due Luna. Panerai introduces the Moon Phase to this signature collection. The moon phase is the first complication in the Luminor Due line. Together with lean proportions and sharp styling, Luminor Due reimagines the typical shape and features of the iconic Luminor collection with a refined form that sits equally well whether the occasion summons an elegant environment and elevated dressing or a casual brunch. Originally a time-only model, a complication has been introduced to this collection for the very first time. Of course the moon phase ranks among the more poetic complications, and so naturally, it is the centerpiece of Luminor Due Luna—the final word in its name being the Italian word for moon. It is available in four iterations, all in a 38mm, to appeal to a broad spectrum of wearers. In each variation, the complication, situated at 3 o'clock, exhibits a rotating disc with a 24 carat moon against a starry midnight blue sky. Apart from the moon that appears on the white sun-brushed dial, luminous Arabic numerals and hour markers highlight the moon phase at 3 o'clock and small seconds at 9 o'clock. But what got our attention was the wealth of coloured strap options, especially in shiny alligator straps like the dark pink strap (inset). Wrist assured, nothing spells distinctive more evocatively than sporting bold hues.

Price on request; **Availability** Brand Stores



post send by (KARISHNA JI)

THE NON-HOTEL RENAISSANCE

With the tread of luxury veering towards non-traditional formats, it is hospitality's turn now to experiment with unconventional accommodation options. Here's why a home away from a hotel may just lead the way to the next big travel trend.

By **RIAAN JACOB GEORGE**

Word on the hospitality block is that, in a post-pandemic world, a significant chunk of luxury travellers are moving towards the 'non-hotel' for lodging options. For starters, this would include anything that does not involve a traditional hotel format. We're talking about villas—and the accompanying villa rental services— home stays, service apartments and more offbeat options like containers, pods, tree houses, heritage castles, tented camps etc. According to an October 2021 report by *Economic Impact*, commissioned by Airbnb, surveying over 4,500 people found that an overwhelming 79 per cent of Indian travellers want to travel in ways that benefit social communities both economically and socially. Thus, this would translate into the concept of 'unique' accommodation options, which the vacation rental platform defines, interestingly as 'barn boat, castle, campsite, hut, island, plane, shepherd's hut, train, treehouse, windmill and yurts', none of which include the word hotel. According to Amanpreet Bajaj, General Manager Airbnb for India: "Alternate accommodations allow for opportunities for travellers to engage with locals and contribute to socio-economic development first hand. Today's luxury traveller uses travel as a way to foster meaningful conversations and regenerate communities." Bajaj also highlights the rapid growth in this non-hotel format. "In India alone, from 2019 to 2021, nights booked at unique properties on Airbnb have increased by over 30 per cent."

Photo Courtesy: AIRBNB

This visible shift is endorsed by booking.com that says that the non-hotel format forms a significant part of their audience base these days. "Some of the trends we are observing are experiential travel and sustainable travel. Wellness travel is another huge trend among high-spending travellers. And the accommodation choices reflect these.

Luxury consumers do not necessarily want expensive products but high quality experiences, which prioritise personalisation, and discovery," says Santosh Kumar, Country Manager, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Indonesia at booking.com According to the website's 2023 ***Travel Predictions Report***, 63 per cent of Indian travellers will be taking a less conventional approach to wellness by seeking serenity at a silent treat. "There is a common perception that off-grid experiences means giving up luxuries (67 per cent of Indian travellers believe that), however, there is a strong desire to combine the two, with 65 per cent only considering travelling 'off-grid' if it can be a more indulgent stay," says Kumar.

Miles to go...

The next logical question in this regard is if the Indian non-hotel format is up to scratch as opposed to markets like, say, the South of France, Bali or Australia, where home rentals compete neck-to-neck with star hotels.

We spoke to Sanjay Wadhawan, Founder and CEO of Earthaa Escapes, a company specialising in luxury villas

ELEMENT OF SURPRISE
A traditional hotel as we know it is giving way to unique genres of accommodation (Left and Above); Unique design, construction and more Instagrammable" spots are gaining popularity (Right)

Photo Courtesy: AIRBNB

Photo Courtesy: EARTHCA

UP AND AWAY
Private villas offer exclusivity, a host of amenities and are ideal for small group getaways (Above & Below)

and home stays, who tells us that there is room for improvement when it comes to this segment in the Indian market. "Contemporary scenarios suggest that India will see a boom in this sector eventually but it is still in its infancy when it comes to boutique luxury stays. It is yet to become sustainable and organised as a sector. In the case of other countries, there is a vast audience to target."

Changing Tastes

Another company that has been quite active on social media lately, is StayVista and their social media campaigns with travel creators is indicative of their bullish approach towards promoting the non-hotel format. We got chatting with Ankita Sheth, Co-founder of StayVista. "The way people travel has evolved," she tells us, "privacy and exclusivity have taken a front seat for most people in the recent past and holiday homes are the closest one can get to that. Vacationers prefer big, open spaces with a host of private amenities including a private pool and lawn where they can stay active and around their co-travellers, instead of being confined to a single room.

Sheth continues: "The average Indian might take fewer breaks a year but when they do, they are open to splurging. Big families, corporates conducting trainings or offsite events, and even people who want to work from exotic locations have been a prime spectrum of audiences that prefer to choose villas instead of hotels."

Photos Courtesy: STAYVISTA

* **GETTING THERE**
India is fast catching up with markets like Bali (Above), France and Australia in this segment

Where do hotels stand?

In terms of the cost component, luxury villas might just be more cost efficient—when divided by the number of people—than the per night rate of a hotel room in the same destination. Is this, then, pushing the Indian traveller away from hotels and towards other formats?

We did ask a couple of hoteliers—who were unable to make an informed comment—about just how much of their market share is being swallowed up by the non-hotel format. Villas, home rental platforms and private accommodation options are definitely a force to reckon with in the current scenario. "I would say that in the business travel segment, the traditional hotel as we know it will not suffer a considerable shift in client base because business travellers still want a fuss-free hotel experience, with all the attached perks. It is in the leisure segment that the challenge lies for hoteliers. Thereby making it harder to compete. With the number of options available to Indian travellers, small groups, large families and gangs of friends are much more prone to booking a villa or a home on rent, where they have the entire place to themselves, as opposed to being confined in one hotel room," says Neeraj

Photos Courtesy: AIRBNB

BEYOND THE FAMILIAR
Ultra-stylised spaces are what luxury travellers are increasingly seeking now (Above & Right)

Gupta, Chennai-based luxury travel agent, and Director of Peekay Holidays. He also agrees that an increasing number of his VIP clients are steering away from traditional hotels and options for more "Instagrammable" spots to vacation at.

The debate remains open for luxury travellers to choose between the service and amenities of a hotel as opposed to the freedom and offbeat side of a luxe rental. Earthaa Escapes' Wadhawan adds, "People these days look for a more natural setting, secluded and curated experiences, along with all other obvious amenities. Travellers want something different; not the obvious, familiar hotel setting, which explains the shift."

Booking.com's Kumar, in conclusion explains this massive paradigm shift in the Indian luxury traveller's itinerary: "In 2023, Indian travellers will be seeking unique vacations that shock and surprise. Our reports suggest that 96 per cent of Indian travellers are looking forward to experiencing 'out of comfort zone' travel that will push them to the limits." One thing is for sure, there will be a noteworthy influx of niche experiences encouraging people to push their travel limits to the extreme, be it in adventure travel, wellness tourism or in other domains. The road untravelled, it seems, has become a travel favourite.

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FAR AND AWAY

The latest luxury travel trend calls out to 'extreme escapism'–and finding yourself along the way.

By **KATE SPICER**

Photo: SHUTTERSTOCK

If the most adventurous thing you did on holiday was wear a dress with cut-outs and sheer panels to the hotel nightclub, then you won't be calling up James Willcox of Untamed Borders to book next year's fortnight away. "If you can't afford to go to Mars," he says, "there's always the Danakil Depression (in northern Ethiopia). I recently took a group of 11 very driven businesswomen for a six-day mountain-biking trip. And it was extraordinarily challenging, not just the 50C heat, noxious gases and lava lake but also in terms of culture and language. It was humbling for them. But in my experience" and, as the originator of some of the most extreme travel out there, his experience is significant "most successful people view humility as the ultimate teacher."

Willcox also arranges tours to places such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan. He does not invite risk. "But I can only do so much. I can't control the inevitable total chaos that is part of the adventure." Having said that, he doubts he will ever do another Danakil cycling trip. "But I'm personally proud of it. Not least because no one died." I'm really not sure if he's joking or not.

Get Lost

Welcome to the world of extreme travel, a trend for which you will not need this summer's essential crochet top. If the words "extreme" and "travel" conjure images of North Face jackets and exploding volcanoes, that's also not quite what it's all about. In this post-ostentation age, the cool tribe shaping mainstream luxury travel are the global nomads, the perma-travellers who rove the planet searching for meaning, community and the perfect tie-front harem pants. For some, though, true luxury must be earned. There cannot be pleasure without first being cast out into the stony desert wilderness, just like Jesus.

Get Lost is a service provided by the travel agent Black Tomato, with prices starting at £10,000 for a short blast of lostness for one in the mountains of Morocco or Iceland, rising to £150,000 for ten days "lost" on the Mongolian steppe, as chosen by one middle-aged female customer. With minimal kit just a tarpaulin, freeze-dried food, water, maps and a compass Get Lost clients are cast out to be alone, while being followed invisibly and at close range by trained, armed service-people. Once they reach the pre-arranged destination, however, great luxury awaits.

"Get Lost trips are like epic productions for us and can require 18 months' planning," says Tom Marchant, the British founder of Black Tomato. "For the client it is extreme escapism. It tends to be

Photo: SHUTTERSTOCK

Photo: SHUTTERSTOCK

popular with people who have something big going on in their lives; they want to gather their thoughts and find perspective. It's the most extreme of the many types of travel we offer to people who want what we call in the industry 'earned experience': long bike rides, epic walks, pilgrimage, swimming treks, taking plant medicine in the Peruvian Amazon, riding a horse through Patagonia. What people want is a break from the day to day, to be out of their comfort zone. They want a holiday with achievement."

Samantha Gash, Endurance Athlete and Inspirational Speaker, says some of this appetite for challenging travel is undoubtedly pandemic-related. She initially founded Her Trails as an online group, providing trail-running programmes for women who wanted to train for longer off-road runs from 15km to 100km or "ultras". "We covered strength and fitness and those trail-running goals, but also more holistic programming like yoga, mobility, hormonal phases and mindset." Both Gash and her business partner, Bec Wilcock, are well-known adventurers and endurance athletes. Once they took Her Trails out IRL, however, they were surprised. Their first three £4,000 retreats, in Tasmania or Australia's Northern Territory, sold out before they had even put them online. What women come for is, "an opportunity to extend themselves and focus on what we have lost not just during the lockdowns, but more generally in 21st-century life. Women especially put their primary focus on work and family." Gash says that while the trips are about being immersed and exposed to nature, it's not about extremes. "Our retreats put people in unfamiliar spaces where they need to go against any default setting into creative self-reliance. From here, they work out who they are and where they want to go. A conscious choice to extend yourself can be powerful, like sitting down to talk with tribal elders, for instance."

In a few weeks Wilcock and Gash start a 1,000-mile endurance run across the Himalayas with Megan Hine, their fellow British professional adventurer and Bear Grylls's right-hand woman. Hine is also offering extreme travel solutions to those who can afford it, as well as lower-priced group trips that use big adventure in Mongolia, Nepal, Kenya and even Snowdonia to teach mental-health coping strategies. "Hanging upside down over a cliff face or deadlines and phones it's

*

ACTIVE PURSUITS
Grape County offers Anjaneri Ultra Trail with breathtaking vistas from this run, which takes place in a mountain pass in Maharashtra's Western Ghats. The runs are offered across distances of 15km, 30km and 60 km (Above right).

all processed in the limbic system, it all triggers the same chemical flood in the body," Hine says.

Off-Grid Outings

Gash balks at the words survival, survivors or survivalist. "Those words apply to people who are hungry or homeless, people facing real adversity. A real adventure will take you to the edge, but to be able to choose to do that is a luxury for people who lead cushy lives." Black Tomato's founding principle is that "people don't know where they want to go, but they do have a sense of how they want to feel". In short, where holidays once served as 14-day analgesics, now they're about waking us up. Because what extreme travel is not, says Willcox, is "beach, eat, drink, shop".

FINDING YOURSELF
People want a break from their comfort zone–a holiday with achievement, whether its long bike rides, epic walks, pilgrimage, swimming treks, taking plant medicine in the Peruvian Amazon (Above), riding a horse through Patagonia (Right).

The extreme travel trend is rising for Black Tomato, says Marchant, up 70 per cent in the UK and more like 80 per cent in the US. But let's be clear, this is growth in a very small market: a handful of Get Losts in the US and UK every year. However, the ripples are seen throughout independent travel. Even Airbnb has an "off-grid" category now. A spokeswoman at its more selective British competitor, Plum Guide, has seen a rise in guests specifically "requesting remote or off-grid homes for long stays" since Covid.

Manex Ibar is a retired record company executive who now serves the highest echelons of society's spiritual needs. He describes privation, wilderness and nature as the "eternal teacher of mankind". His Wisdom Quest retreats are a gentler version of the American Indian traditional rite of passage for teenage boys known as the vision quest. "For three days we prepare them for their time alone on the mountain lots of deep meditation, for instance," says Ibar. "Then we send everyone up to the mountain completely alone with some basics—tent, sleeping bag, water. Some will fight with their egos, some experience magic, others run naked for five days or scream and clear out old anger, or they dance; some sleep for days. Most people will fast."

Some of Ibar's retreats are public, others are private. This summer he has "a group of four friends, successful entrepreneurs, coming on one. When you get away from all your distractions you can finally hear yourself. Most people realise that the fears you go into when you go into survival mode up on the mountain very quickly disappear. You realise you are safe, that it is natural. Getting fully away from all the usual distractions means you can finally be yourself." 'A real adventure will take you to the edge, but to be able to choose to do that is a luxury'.

Courtesy The Sunday Times (UK)

Photos: SHUTTERSTOCK

The Asian Tee Party

Golf resorts are as much about luxury and wellness as they are about golf. Here are five of the best 'stay & play', golf resorts in Asia to head for this winter.

By **MERAJ SHAH**

Yes, the hallowed crests and vales of St. Andrews at Scotland are still the holiest grail. True, the links courses in Ireland are still the true test of any semblance of mastery over this fickle, cruel and magnificent game. But there's a whole new set of experiences out there for golf nuts—from multiple-course repasts in Mauritius, Thailand and Delhi to tropical gems in Langkawi and Mauritius. Gather your clubs, lie through your teeth to your better-halves, and slink away with your golfing buddies to indulge your greatest vice, at some of the finest golf resorts in Asia.

Black Mountain Golf Club, Hua Hin, Thailand

Golfers are confronted with a surfeit of golf courses in Hua Hin—as many as ten championship layouts—but most make a beeline for the top-rated Black Mountain Golf Club, designed by Australian Phil Ryan and the venue for numerous Asian Tour events. Set in the shadow of the Black Mountain, and dominated by rocky outcrop, Black Mountain is a modern layout characterised by large greens and peppered with bunkers (highlighted by red pampas grass, very common on courses in Thailand). Among Black Mountain's features are rock faces set in to the mountains and natural creeks that run through the course. The par-3 11th is Ryan's signature hole: it has a green cradled by a wall of white stones and protected by an expanse of water. The course also has dramatic elevation changes which make for interesting tee shots, none more so than on the downhill par-5 sixth hole, with its twin fairways. Not surprisingly, Black Mountain has become a winter home for a bunch of Swedish golf pros including the likes of Johan Edfors (who owns a villa here) and Henrik Stenson.

TRAVEL DESK

Hua Hin is a five-six hour drive from the Thai Capital. Visa-on Arrival is available for Indian citizens. Hang your hat at the two-bedroom villa, or a three-bedroom villa if you're travelling with your fourball. Pay and stay packages start from THB 7995 per person (Three rounds; 2 nights) and THB 14,995 (six rounds; six nights). www.blackmountainhuahin.com.

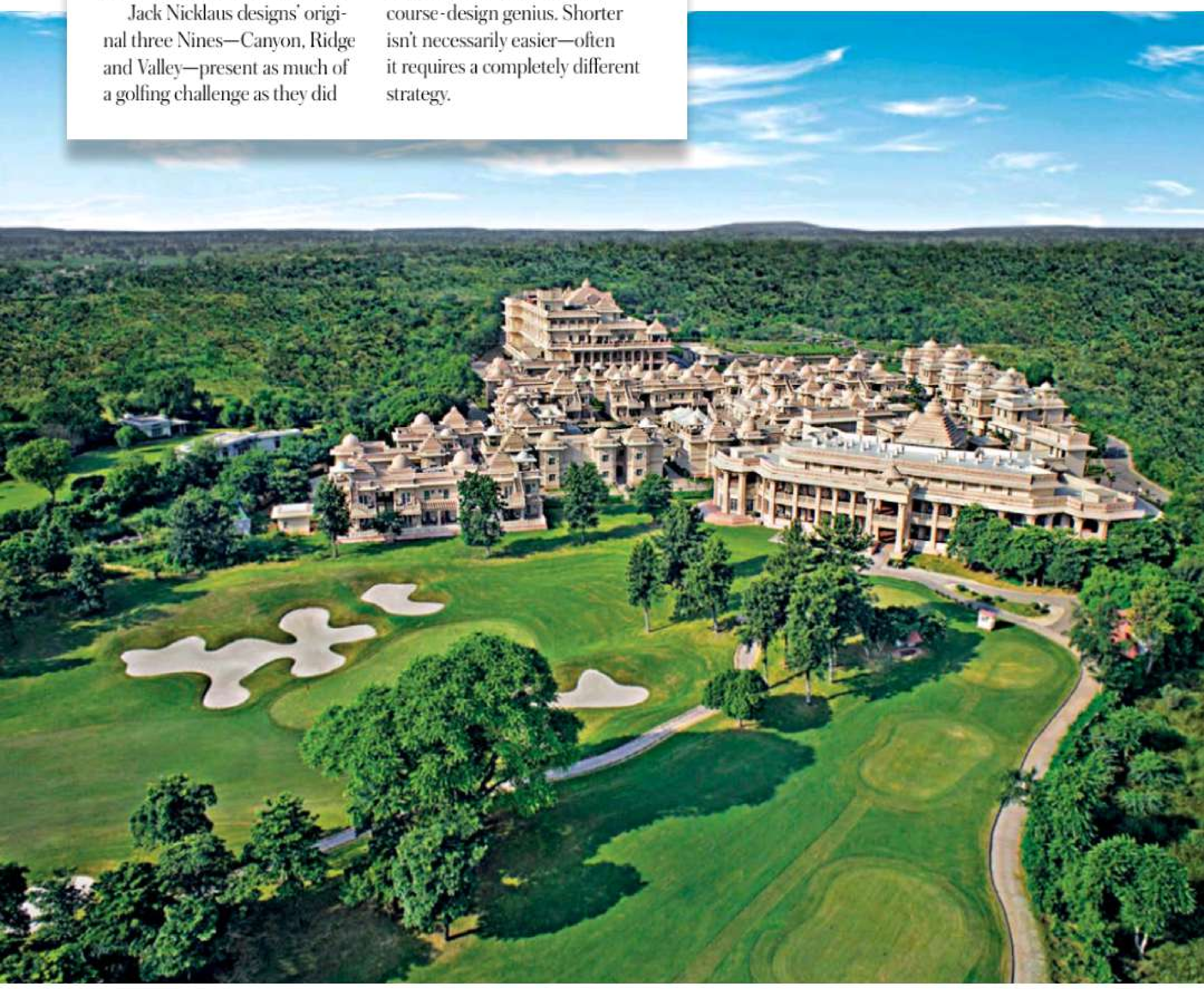
Classic Golf & Country Club (ITC Grand Bharat), NCR, India

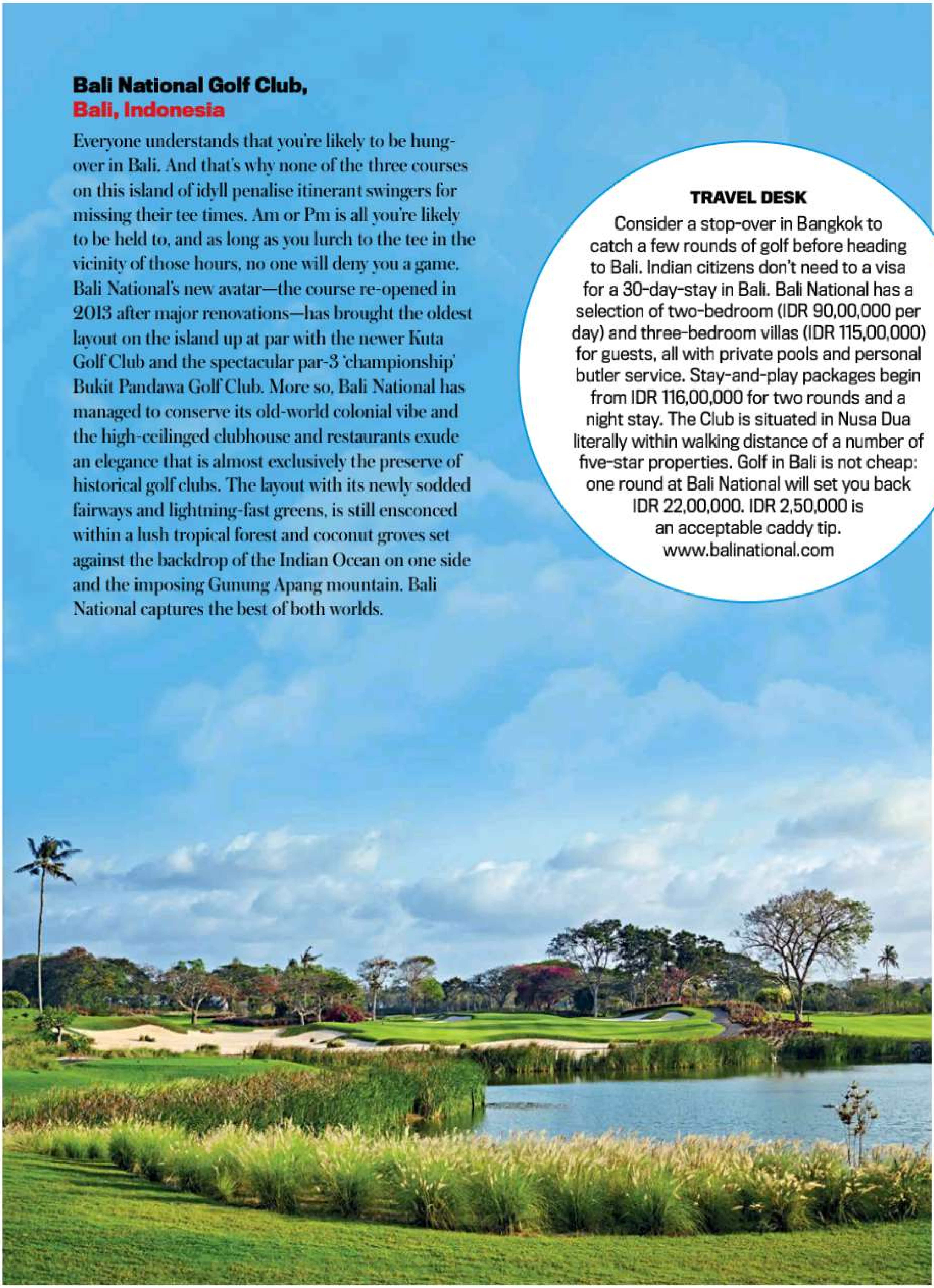
First there was a standalone 27-hole golf course, and now there's a resort; so superlative, that it makes the three nines look like complements to the property, rather than the other way around. It's hard to overstate the sybaritic allure of the ITC Grand Bharat: an all-suite extravaganza of gastronomic indulgence, wellness, and supremely deluxe habitation that would make a regular five-star property look and feel like a slummy hole-in-the-wall.

Jack Nicklaus designs' original three Nines—Canyon, Ridge and Valley—present as much of a golfing challenge as they did when built (1998). This is a fun golf course to play; if you're not having fun then do yourself a favour and move to the blue tees, or even the whites. Instantly the course changes in character. No longer a leviathan, it rewards precision placement, strategy and a sound short game. For that reason alone, players irrespective of abilities will enjoy playing from different tees on subsequent rounds just to get an insight into Nicklaus' golf-course-design genius. Shorter isn't necessarily easier—often it requires a completely different strategy.

TRAVEL DESK

The ITC Grand Bharat's acreage spans over a 100 suites (which come either with a semi-private pool or a terrace); top-notch restaurants serving up everything from traditional Mewati to European cuisine; a 35000-square-foot spa (which offers a couple of golf-specific therapies) that could, hypothetically speaking, keep the missus in good humour; and a host of outdoorsy activities–which you're likely to spurn to get in another round–but which might interest the kids. All in all, it's a picture of familial bliss on a staycation that incidentally happens to involve 27 holes of golf. www.itchotels.in/hotels/gurgaon/itcgrandbharat





Bali National Golf Club,
Bali, Indonesia

Everyone understands that you're likely to be hung-over in Bali. And that's why none of the three courses on this island of idyll penalise itinerant swingers for missing their tee times. Am or Pm is all you're likely to be held to, and as long as you lurch to the tee in the vicinity of those hours, no one will deny you a game. Bali National's new avatar—the course re-opened in 2013 after major renovations—has brought the oldest layout on the island up at par with the newer Kuta Golf Club and the spectacular par-3 'championship' Bukit Pandawa Golf Club. More so, Bali National has managed to conserve its old-world colonial vibe and the high-ceilinged clubhouse and restaurants exude an elegance that is almost exclusively the preserve of historical golf clubs. The layout with its newly sodded fairways and lightning-fast greens, is still ensconced within a lush tropical forest and coconut groves set against the backdrop of the Indian Ocean on one side and the imposing Gunung Apang mountain. Bali National captures the best of both worlds.

TRAVEL DESK

Consider a stop-over in Bangkok to catch a few rounds of golf before heading to Bali. Indian citizens don't need to a visa for a 30-day-stay in Bali. Bali National has a selection of two-bedroom (IDR 90,00,000 per day) and three-bedroom villas (IDR 115,00,000) for guests, all with private pools and personal butler service. Stay-and-play packages begin from IDR 116,00,000 for two rounds and a night stay. The Club is situated in Nusa Dua literally within walking distance of a number of five-star properties. Golf in Bali is not cheap: one round at Bali National will set you back IDR 22,00,000. IDR 2,50,000 is an acceptable caddy tip.
www.balinational.com

The Els Club, Teluk Datai, Langkawi, Malaysia

Ranked 84th in 'Golf Digest's Top 100 Greatest Golf Courses in the World', the Els Club Teluk Datai is by far one the finest golf courses in Asia. Set amidst a million-year-old rainforest and abutted by the ocean, the course has an abundance of 100 feet high trees, an assortment of local wildlife and stupendous vistas of the ocean. The course underwent significant redesign and renovation a few years back at a time when it was already considered one of the best courses in the region. The unique thing about the new course is a complete absence of bunkers ostensibly to account for the heavy rain that Langkawi receives; but the impenetrable forest on the side-lines and liberal water hazards make the Datai a formidable challenge, especially from the tips. That said, playing this course is more about the stunning views more than the golf itself.

TRAVEL DESK

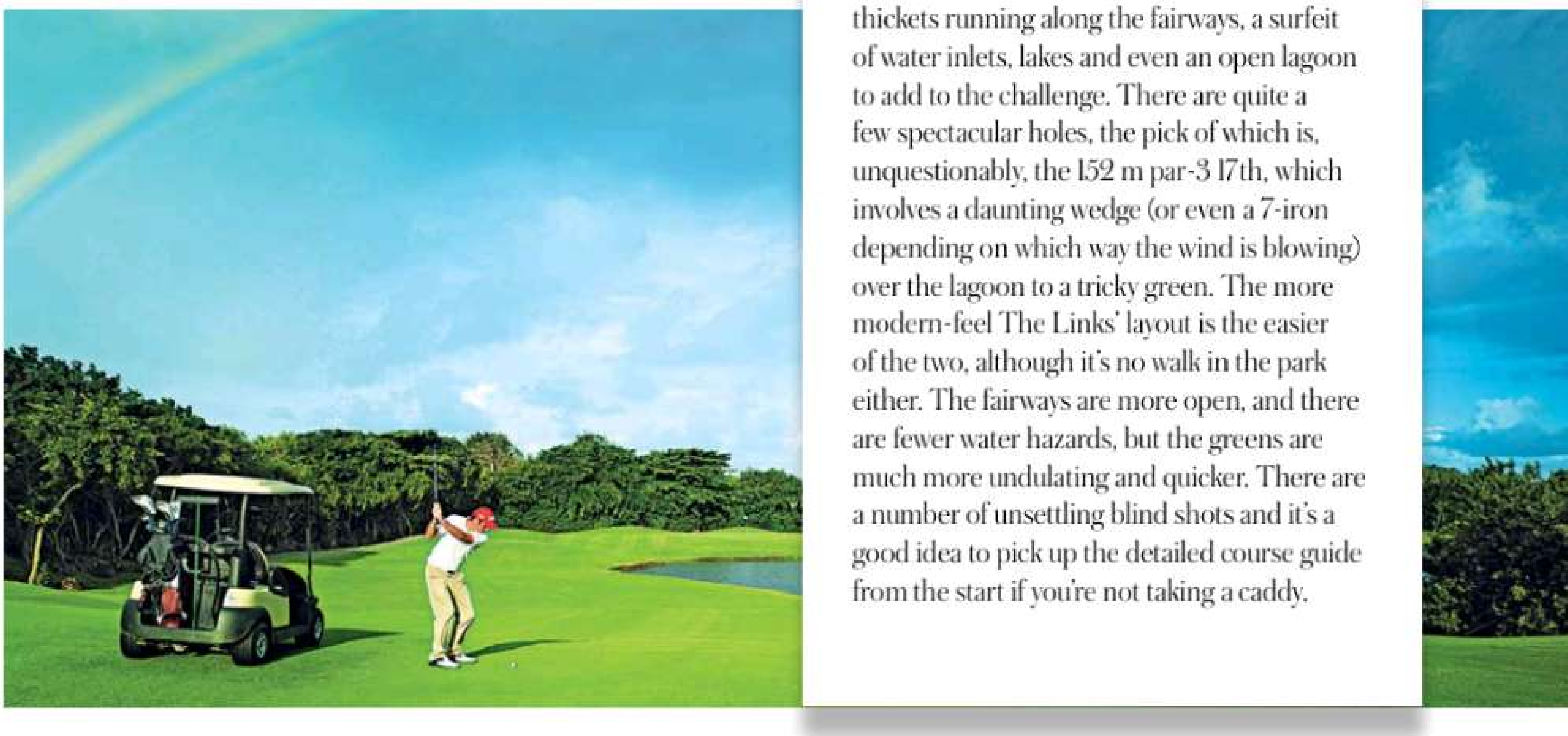
Langkawi is a mere 40 minutes flying time from KL. Indian citizens need to acquire a Malaysian visa before embarking to the country. The Rainforest Course is accompanied by two luxury resorts; The Datai and The Andaman that offer a smorgasbord of lodging options for itinerant golfers. Stay-and-Play packages begin from RM 4480+ (One round; three days and two nights at The Andaman)

TRAVEL DESK

With more of an emphasis on fun, entertainment and food (rather than solitude), the sprawling Belle Mare Plage, replete with five pools, two spas (including a dedicated shisiedo spa) sits right across the road from the Legend Golf Course. The hotel has a wide range of meticulously appointed lodgings and the golf is free for guests. www.bellemareplagehotel.constancehotels.com

Belle Mare Plage, Mauritius

With a choice of two—The Legend and The Links layouts, which are attached to the Constance Belle Mare Plage hotel, this resort is the hub of golfing action on this tropical atoll nation. Host of the Mauritian Open and a European Senior Tour event, The Legend is the older and tougher of the two—with punishing thickets running along the fairways, a surfeit of water inlets, lakes and even an open lagoon to add to the challenge. There are quite a few spectacular holes, the pick of which is, unquestionably, the 152 m par-3 17th, which involves a daunting wedge (or even a 7-iron depending on which way the wind is blowing) over the lagoon to a tricky green. The more modern-feel The Links' layout is the easier of the two, although it's no walk in the park either. The fairways are more open, and there are fewer water hazards, but the greens are much more undulating and quicker. There are a number of unsettling blind shots and it's a good idea to pick up the detailed course guide from the start if you're not taking a caddy.



Hedonism and History

Phiadelphia made it to Time magazine's list of the world's 100 greatest places last year. What gives?

By **PREETI VERMA LAL**

"New York is a place where people go to reinvent themselves; Philadelphia is a place where people discover who they are".

Bumper stickers can hardly be considered a slam-dunk to sum up a city, but when it comes to Philadelphia, we can take the liberty of being cheesy: It is the land of "life, liberty and cheesesteaks". But Philly is so much more than a sum of its ingenious parts. So it was no surprise when Philadelphia, or Philly, made it to Time magazine's list of the world's 100 greatest places last year. The first US capital, the city is home to many firsts: nation's first library, hospital, medical school, stock exchange, zoo, business school, and of course the epic Philadelphia cheesesteaks; Rocky Balboa-connection and the US Declaration of Independence & Constitution.

The Guild House

It is not always that you can holler through a hole at a hotel's entrance door. Or, walk in with no concierge in sight. Not even an elevator. Just an old-fashioned dumbwaiter on which you load your bags for one of the 12 rooms in the historical The Guild House hotel which was listed by Travel & Leisure as one of the world's best new hotels in 2022. The walls speak history, the concierge is virtual. And there is a dash of old-world luxury everywhere.

The building, a designated National Historical Landmark, is seeped in feminist history dating back to 1882. It was a time in American history when women couldn't vote and were regularly refused service in hotels, clubs, restaurants and stores, unless they were accompanied by a man. But it was in this four-storied house - then the New Century Guild - that women got a moment of respite from a rather unkind outside world. They could come to have a cup of tea, learn skills, play the piano, rested in wood-panelled rooms, chatter, read books in the lounge and find sisterhood support in a rather unkind outside world.

The Italianate brick rowhouse originally constructed in 1851 as a private residence remains loyal to its past.

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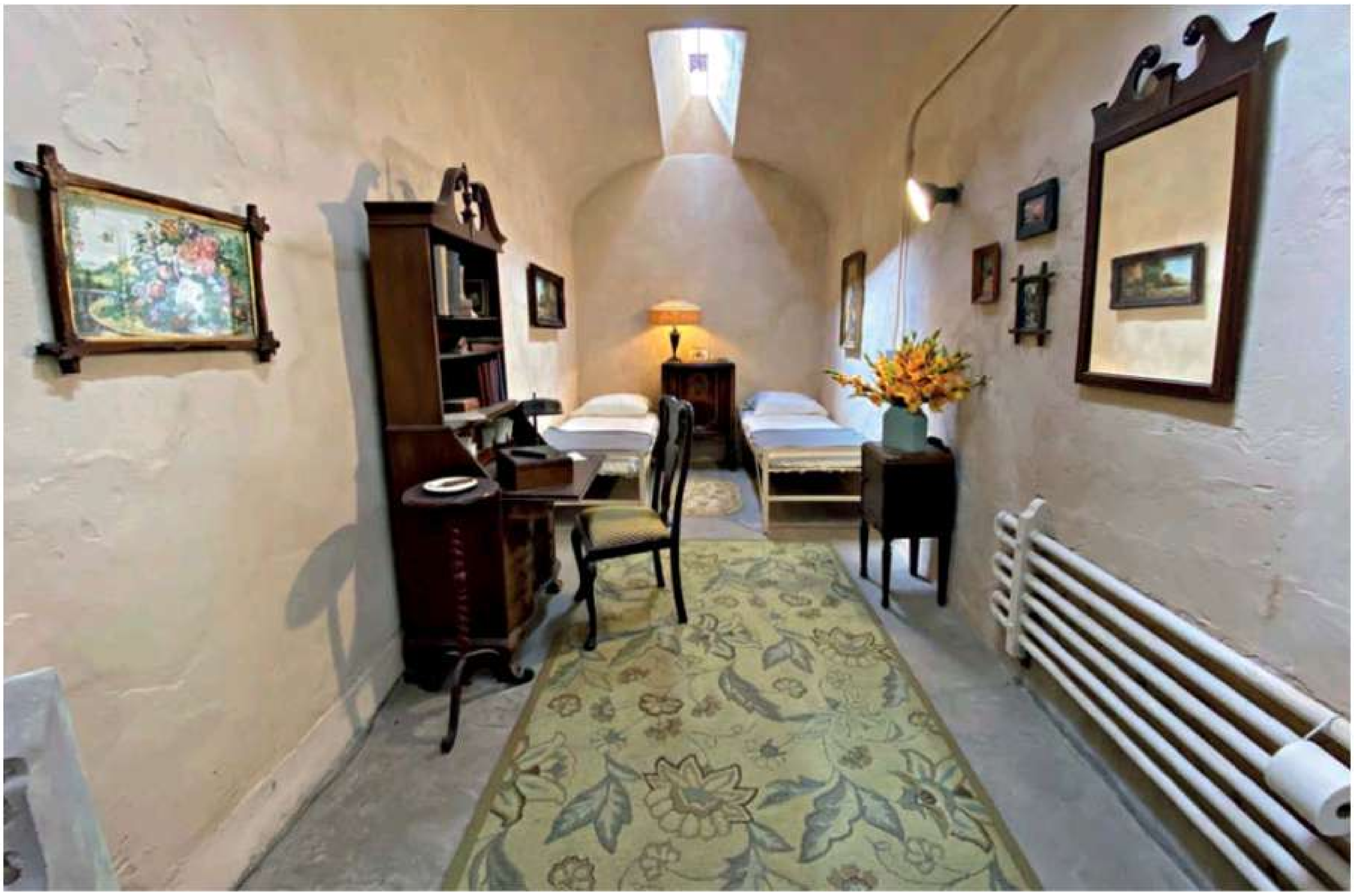
NUMERO UNO

The 12-room The Guild House Hotel was listed as one of the world's best new hotels of 2022 (Left); The Guild House is faithful to its past but boasts modern amenities (Below)

Photo courtesy: THE GUILD HOUSE

The rooms are named after the Guild members. The Wilda Suite is named after Wilda Love, who was also the first official cook for the Guild's Thursday night meals. The Florence Suite pays homage to Florence Kelley, a fireball, who spent her entire life fighting for the rights of women, children and Black Americans. The Mathilde Suite harks back to the black-and-white photography that connected Mathilde Weil to the Guild and took her around the world. The Alice, a deluxe split-level suite, occupies the space that was once the New Century Guild's auditorium, a place that Dr. Alice Norton filled with music, entertainment and celebration more than a century ago. The Ruby Suite, originally the home's billiard room, still features the original millwork wainscoting, plus its Art Nouveau chandelier. In this Philadelphia historic hotel, history will sing a lullaby. Listen carefully. Sleep peacefully.

www.guildhousehotel.com

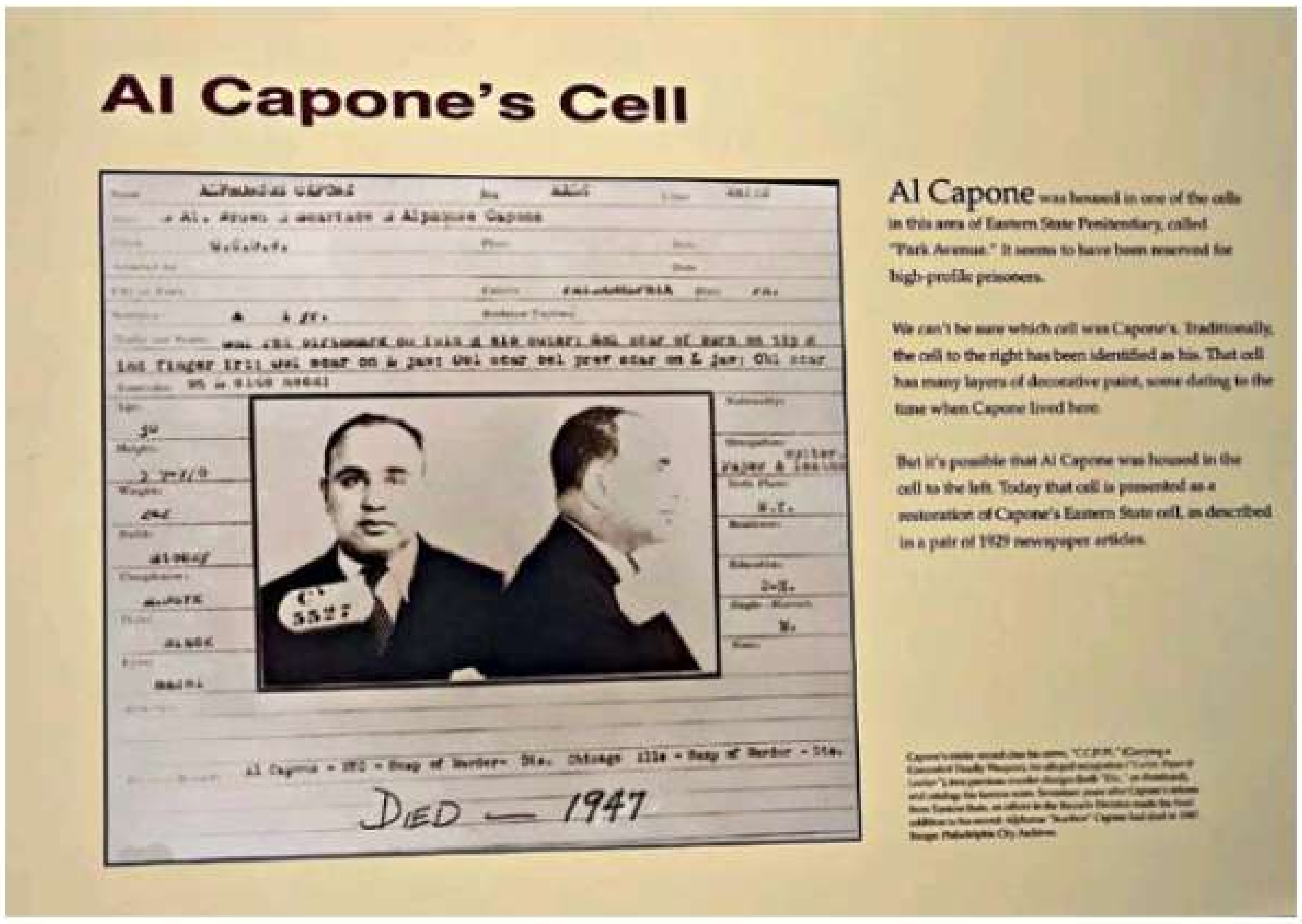


Photos: PREETI VERMA LAL

History's Men

All stories in Philadelphia begin with William Penn who founded the city in 1682. It was here that the historical Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution were debated and adopted. The city was the country's capital between 1790 and 1800. Perhaps the best way to relive the bygone age is to step into Independence Hall, the centrepiece of Independence National Historic Park. Inside the large rectangular Assembly Room, there are green chairs and straight tables, a high chair on which George Washington sat, Benjamin Franklin's cane and drafts of the Declaration that they discussed. In the National Constitution Museum across the street, one can sign the Declaration in a fat, blue-spine book with sculpted George Washington staring intently.

Listen to the stories about Benjamin Franklin, by turns pamphleteer, apprentice, printer, balladeer, inventor, philosopher, politician, soldier, firefighter, ambassador, shopkeeper, bookseller, cartoonist.... Phew! That's too many things for one man to do in one lifetime. But Franklin lived and died in Philadelphia; visit his grave and the remnants of his house.



Al Capone's Cell

DIED — 1947

Al Capone was housed in one of the cells in this area of Eastern State Penitentiary, called "Park Avenue." It seems to have been reserved for high-profile prisoners.

We can't be sure which cell was Capone's. Traditionally, the cell to the right has been identified as his. That cell has many layers of decorative paint, some dating to the time when Capone lived here.

But it's possible that Al Capone was housed in the cell to the left. Today that cell is presented as a restoration of Capone's Eastern State cell, as described in a pair of 1929 newspaper articles.

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CAPONE-STYLE CONTRITION
Al Capone, one of the most famous inmates of the Eastern State Penitentiary, had a well-appointed cell (Top); A certificate of Al Capone's time in the Eastern State Penitentiary (Above)

The Rocky Trail

A macho boxer. A muscled, sweaty, bruised, black-eyed Rocky Balboa in satin boxers sporting a bare chest, spouting muffled dialogues and throwing soulful gazes is a memory for the hall of fame. This was the underdog who once climbed the 72 steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, his fist punching the sky, his eye still black after a boxing bout. I walked up to Rocky. Rocky Balboa (Sylvester Stallone)—the one sculpted in bronze standing at the East Gate of the Museum. So sassy was the Museum steps-climbing scene in the film Rocky Balboa that the Museum steps are now known as Rocky Steps. No one really remembers that Toni Colette too panted it up with her four dogs in In Her Shoes. For posterity, the steps are Rocky's. If you're a 'Sly' fan, you'll know and understand why.

Reading Terminal Market

Voted the best public market in the nation in 2022 by USA Today's 10Best, the Reading Terminal Market is home to nearly 80 merchants (including 26 restaurants). Walk around to find mozzarella cheese made on site at the Valley Shepherd Creamery; soft pretzels at Miller's Twist; Old City Coffee; Apple dumplings at Dutch Eating Place; Bassetts Ice Cream that was founded in 1861; Beiler's Bakery Doughnuts; Cannoli at Terminal Brothers Bakery; Flying Monkey's Whoopie Pies; Mike Tyson special ears that are OK to bite—a chocolate ear. A milk chocolate lung for $22.95. Solid chocolate rat for $5. Even a Choc-Aid (like Band-Aid) for "life's boo boos". Another unmissable: Tommy DiNic's roast pork sandwich, winner of Travel Channel's Adam Richman's Best Sandwich in America. Made with thinly sliced roast pork, sharp provolone cheese, and either broccoli rabe or long hot peppers, the signature roast pork sandwich has been a hot seller for more than 40 years.

OLD CITY COFFEE INC
COFFEE ROASTED ON PREMISES
ORDER ONLINE

*

SIMPLY HISTORIC
The Reading Terminal Market is one of the best places to eat in Philadelphia (Top), The Independence Hall is the centrepiece of Independence National Historic Park (Below)

Eastern State Penitentiary

Philadelphia. May, 1929. A man with an unlicensed .38 caliber revolver was arrested outside a movie theatre. His name: Alphonse 'Scarface' Capone; the most notorious bootlegger of his time. His prison: Eastern State Penitentiary (ESP), Philadelphia. His room: A solitary cell in Park Avenue block with fine furniture, oriental rugs, beautiful paintings, and a cabinet radio. The hazel-eyed, black-haired bootlegger liked to listen to waltzes in his cell. Al Capone was probably ESP's most famous inmate but the penitentiary's fame stemmed from its philosophy to change the behaviour of inmates through 'confinement in solitude with labour'. The stress was on 'penitence', hence ESP was called a penitentiary and not a prison.

The Penitentiary that operated for 142 consecutive years has other famous reasons. Pep, the dog that was sent to prison for murdering Governor Gifford Pinchot's cat. Of course, Leo Callahan, the only convict who managed to escape in 1923 and was never recaptured. It has also been relegated to the Matinee hall of fame as a set for ***Transformers 2*** with Megan Fox; ***12 Monkeys*** with Brad Pitt and Bruce Willis; ***Return to Paradise*** and CBS's ***Cold Case*** as well as Tina Turner and rapper Beanie Sigel music videos were also shot here.

The British capital's culinary landscape is mushrooming with a fresh crop of Indian restaurants. Here's what's dotting the epicurean map.

By **RUPALI DEAN**

CURRYING FAVOUR IN LONDON

YUM'S THE WORD
Manthan by Rohit Ghai at Mayfair (opposite page); Celebrity Chef Vivek Singh's Cinnamon Club (Left) with its famed Bheja fry (Top left); Manthan's Gali ka khana (Below left)

Photos: JUSTIN DESOUZA

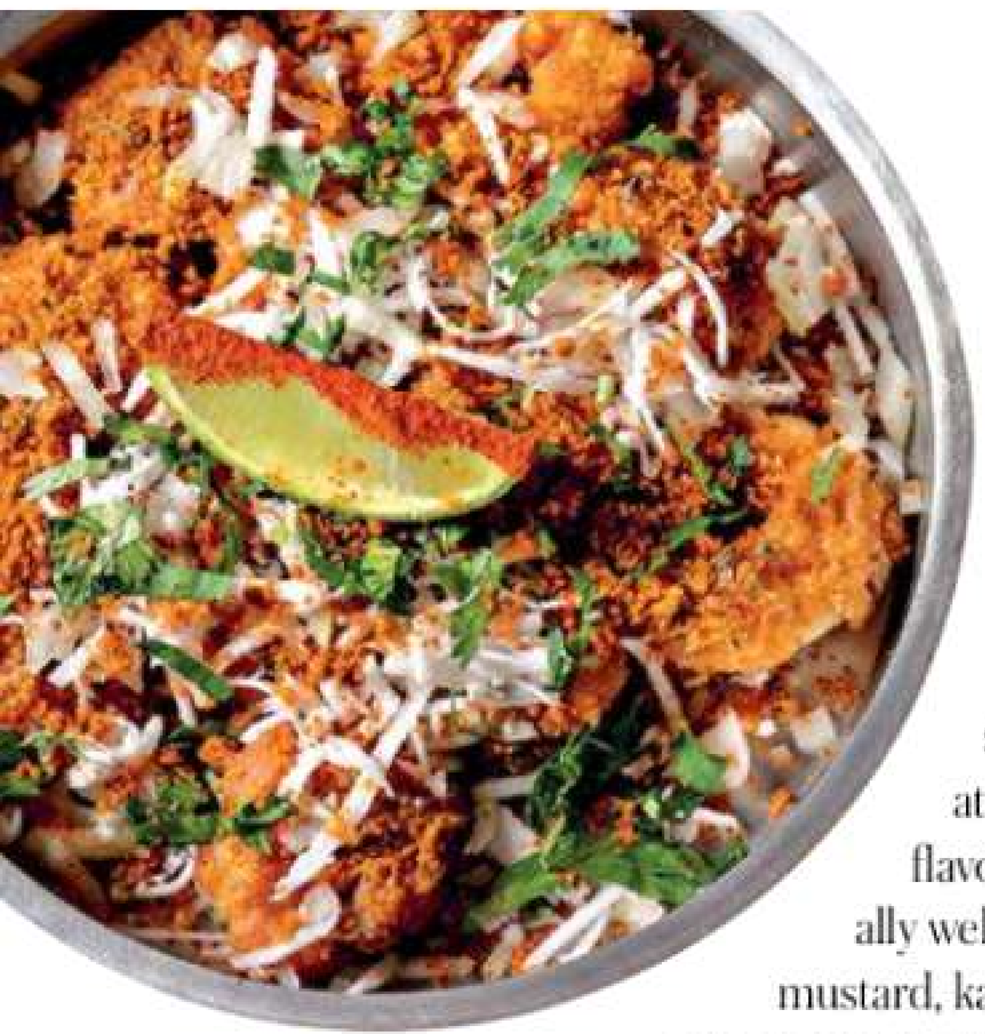
London' top tables have always lorded over tantalisingly eclectic offerings. The smorgasboard of choices: Wiltons in St James that still sports its set three-course menu to the customary afternoon tea at Fortnum and Mason to Lanesborough's reimagined flagship restaurant is home to Chef Shay Cooper's contemporary British food that brings to life seasonal produce from across the country. Whether it's a Thai cash-only place like Singburi where you queue up for the twice-fried, crispy pork belly with garlic and chilli or the ritzy Bibi that summons an exciting modern Indian treat, London's restaurants are distinct, imaginative and exciting.

Of course old Indian favourites such as celebrity chef Vivek Singh's original modern Indian restaurant Cinnamon Club—located in the former Westminster Library with its forever favourite Bheja fry, and Camellia Punjabi's Veeraswamy with its signature Raj kachoris never go out of habit. Another dynamic gourmet stop is chef Rishim Sachdeva's Tendril that offers mostly vegan food, lending credence to the global shift towards plant-focussed cuisine. Hop on the gravy train as Spice explores the newest Indian tables on the block.

MANTHAN MAYFAIR BY THE TEAM OF KUTIR, LONDON

Pioneering Indian sharing plates

While London undeniably vies for one of the top spots among the most varied gastronomic backdrops in the world, Indian cuisine is the first among equals—the obvious love child in this case. Manthan, however, is all set to shakeup the panorama thanks to an innovative menu with contemporary tweaks. Sitting pretty smack in the heart of Mayfair, Manthan's food is inspired by chef patron, Rohit Ghai's extensive global career and the dishes reflect his extensive wanderings. Opulent decor resonates in sleek dark wood and marble with a menu that's designed for



sharing. It represents Ghai's appreciation of both home-style cooking and rarefied culinary skills. He draws inspiration from his childhood memories of Madhya Pradesh as well as his time working in London's finest Indian restaurants, counting Jamavar where he won a Michelin star in less than a year and also earning his chops at Bombay Bustle on the same street. Traditional flavours marry progressive modern tweaks exceptionally well. From the peppery Sarson chicken chop with mustard, kachumber salad and mint chutney to the innovative selection of cocktails with infusions and flavours that complement the food beautifully, choices are as varied as the chutneys. Interesting contrasts of textures make for a great show in the ghati masala prawns with peanuts, sesame seeds and fresh coconut that make for a stellar starter selection. Meat lovers should fix their gaze on the Goat Shammi kebab in bone marrow sauce; it's simply divine. Hold off for desserts that are just as creative as they are wild: the Narangi chocolate or the Trio of laddo, Gulab Jamun and shrikhand. The wait staff is attentive without being intrusive, while making wise recommendations. Ghai's partner, Abhishake Sangwan (formerly of Trishna & Jamavar Fame) guides guests through the seven oceans with cocktails that showcase the myths that surround them, using fresh fruits and exotic botanicals.

WHERE 49 Maddox St, London, WIS 2PQ

TIMINGS 12 pm until 10 pm; Brunch is available through the week from 12:30 pm to 5Pm; Closed on Mondays.

CONTACT https://www.manthanmayfair.co.uk/

COST GBP 80 (For two, without alcohol)

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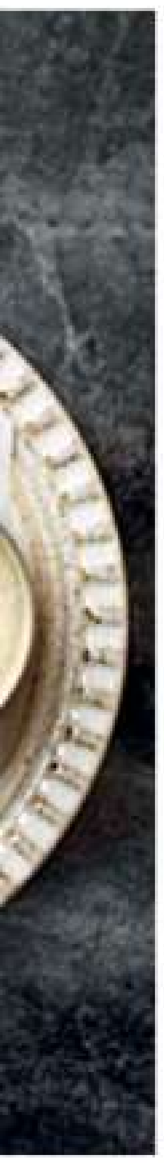
THE ART OF SLEEP Chicken Buttermilk at Manthan (Right); The interiors at Chourangi (Above right); Kosha Mutton (Above far right); Prawn cutlet at Chourangi (Far right); Baked sandesh (Opposite page bottom)

Photo: JUSTIN DESOUZA

CHOURANGI
CHOURANGI
OPENING SOON



CHOURANGI, LONDON

Elegant Kolkata-style dining in a buoyant space just off Oxford Street

This is isn't just regular Indian food. This is Chourangi, where authenticity punctuates the classy rattan teak stained furniture, with whirring ceiling fans and paintings-adorned walls that bring home the most vibrant part of Kolkata—Chowringhee. The first thing to note, aside from the cosy, elegant interiors and rich, mouth-watering wafting fragrance of spices and freshly baked bread is its location—slap-bang in the middle of Oxford's main strip and just steps away from the Marble Arch station. The menu and recipes have been expertly curated by chef turned restaurateur Anjan Chatterjee, along with Aditya Ghosh (lawyer turned airline entrepreneur). Chatterjee and Ghosh came up with the idea over a meal in one of the former's restaurants a few years ago. This, therefore, is the newest project from Speciality Restaurants Ltd, which runs an impressive 130 sites, most of them in India.

The extensive menu is packed with a striking mix of British, Portuguese, French, Armenian, Dutch and Chinese flavours that have sprung over a 300-year antiquity. Sample the Daak Bungalow chicken curry, Pot Roasted Jackfruit or lamb biryani that's rich with potatoes and egg, just the way history and habit ordained. The Hakka style lotus root and sweet potato chaat is crunchy, with deep-fried lotus root slices as a scrumptious distraction from the creamy sweet potato, with a splash of soy sauce for a comfortable umami note. The chilli paneer is delightful too. Standouts from the main course include the Kosha Lamb and Malai Jheenga. The grand trunk black dal that's bubbled overnight lends a happy creaminess that's bolstered with real cream and butter. As with most memorable restaurants, it's the service that really sets Chourangiapart from its competitors, so don't be shy when it comes to asking for advice on what to order. The staff is as informed as they are congenial.

WHERE 3 Old Quebec Street, Marble Arch, WIH 7AF
TIMINGS Mon to Sun 12pm – 10:30pm
https://chourangi.co.uk/
COST GBP 80 (For two, without alcohol)

Why Montecristo Counts

Beyond the mists of myth, the lure of the Montecristo lies as much in its lore as its legendary draw.

By **SHANKER GANGADHAR**

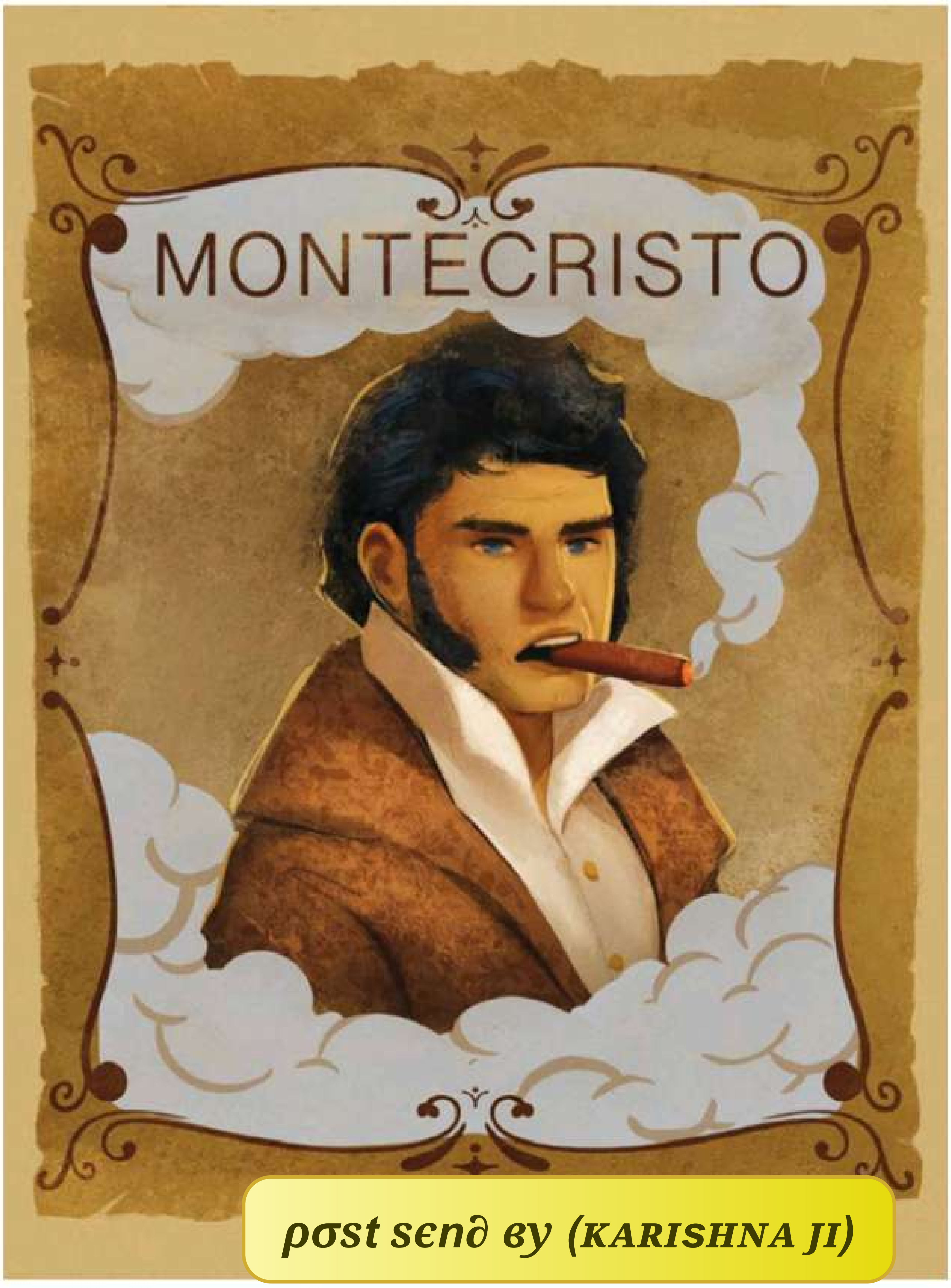


Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE

post send by (KARISHNA JI)

The 19th century French auteur Alexandre Dumas of Count of Monte Cristo fame smoked pot. A lot of it. But Dumas's enigmatic hero, Edmund Dantès's taste in tobacco was suitably recherché: he smoked cigars. The story of his doomed romance with Mercedes is a favourite with Cuban torcedors (rollers), and the cigar, one of the world's largest selling brands, is named after Dantès. So popular is the novel that it is still read out in Cuba's cigar factories by lectores and lectoras—story tellers who see themselves as cultural promoters. In 1935, Alonso Menendez, who owned Montecristo and H Uppman brands, decided that his employees needed to improve their knowledge. He picked a torcedor with a literary bent to read aloud famous books to the rollers working at their desks on exquisitely tiled floors. In the novel, Abbe tells Dantès, "To learn is not to know; there are the learners and the learned. Memory makes the one, philosophy the others." It is the philosophy of the torcedors

LEAF TURNING TO LEAF CURLING
The eponymous cigar–one of the largest selling brands in the world–was named after Dantès *The Count of Montecristo*, a favourite novel with Cuban rollers.

in the halls of Habanos. So popular are lectores in cigar lore that a play set in 1929 Cuba about cigar rollers called "Anna in the Tropics" even won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2003—unusual for a theatrical piece that did not have a Broadway premiere. In the play, a lectore reads "Anna Karenina " in a cigar factory. As the concurrent streams of reading and rolling enjoin, one leaf turning, another leaf curling, literary passion shreds the blue collar stereotype of mulatto women rolling stogies on their voluptuous thighs. The torcedors get their culture from classic literature, not porn.

Montecristo is to tobacco what a Piper-Heidsieck Rare 2002 is to champagne and Cuba's official tobacco company Habanos SA produces millions of the cigars, which now make up one quarter of its total sales. The Montecristo No. 4, which rollers call 'Mareva'—Spanish for petit corona—a standard 5 1/8 inches by 42 ring gauge smoke, is the irrefutable yardstick by which all Cuban cigars are measured. Its unmistakable smooth and mellow draw, rich and creamy aroma and smoothly intermingling flavours of leather, coffee and earth makes the No.4 the world's bestselling cigar—about 20 million sticks are sold worldwide each year. Alfonso, who fled to the Dominican Republic after the Cuban Revolution, made Montecristos with Dominican fillers, which simply wasn't the same. However, cigaristas have good words for the Montecristo Classic that comes with Dominican long-fillers, and wrapped in Connecticut Shade leaf. The Montecristo

Platinum whose smoke tastes of earth, coffee, honey and wood is a blend of long-filler tobaccos harvested in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Peru. While the popular non-Cuban avatars are Montecristo White and Monte by Montecristo AJ Fernandez, the original vitolas are still the thick torpedo-shaped No. 2 and Number 1. A Lonsdale. By the 1970s and 1980s, the Cuban Montecristo cigars had begun to dominate the top shelves of the world's trendiest cigar clubs. The Monte Cristo No. 5, a short, punchy 4 by 42 smoke with a lightly veined café au lait wrapper, is the shortest cigar in the portfolio. Its flavours are classic Montecristo —chocolate, sweet cream, dry cedar, natural tobacco, and vanilla. The cold draw tastes of leather and cocoa.

Habanos is constantly experimenting with its portfolio. In 2014, arrived Montecristo Edmundo, loaded with subtle notes of coffee, wood, earth, and spice. The Petit Edmundo followed in 2006, and the Double Edmundo in 2013. The unique Montecristo A is the only 'A' size Cuban gran corona on earth—'A' being the standard size of the largest cigar: 9 1/4 inches long by 47 ring gauge. Cigar collectors are a dedicated lot; a box of the extinct Montecristo B once went for $8,500 at a Christie's auction. The Montecristo Open and the Montecristo Línea 1935 are already bookmarked in the world's cigar saga. This October, the newly born Wide Edmundo literally duked it out at a Madrid nightclub: Cuban cigar makers refer to its 4 7/8 inches by 54 ring gauge size as Duke No. 3. In Dumas's novel, one character asks another, "Well, what do you think of the Count of Monte Cristo?' The reply defines the essence of the Montecristo smoker: "I think he is a charming man who does the honors of his table to perfection; a man who has seen much, studied much, and thought much; who, like Brutus, belongs to the school of the Stoics, and who possesses most excellent cigars." The lectores couldn't agree more.

MONTECRISTO

MONTE CRISTO HABANA
MONTECRISTO
HABANA · CUBA
Edmundo
MONTECRISTO
HABANA

*

FRAGRANT LEAF
In 2014, came the Montecristo Edmundo, followed by the Petit Edmundo in 2006, and the Double Edmundo in 2013

Where Art Meets Craft

Boasting not only the oldest, but one of the most picturesque distilleries in Scotland, Balblair offers so much more than just a valued evening companion.

By **VIKRAM ACHANTA**

BALBLAIR
EST 1790
DISTILLERY CO. LTD.
EDDERTON
12

Balblair is a single malt brand hailing from the town of Edderton in the Scottish Highlands, and made in one of the oldest working distilleries in Scotland, dating back to 1790. Not only the oldest, it's also one of the most picturesque distilleries in Scotland, with its location on the Dornoch Firth and easy access to AlltDearg burn (a burn is the name given to a large stream in Scotland) for its water supply. Its scenic credentials stood it in good stead when acclaimed director Ken Loach was scouting for locations for Angel's Share his 2012 comedy—a movie that also went on to win the Jury prize at the 2012 Cannes film festival.

Balblair is a Gaelic word that translates into "town of the plain" or battlefield and each bottle of Balblair carries on it a unique symbol with Pictish origins that represents a broken spear or sword. The year 2019 saw the distillery launch a new range of age-statement expressions. Although the range was new, what didn't change, however, was the careful attention to detail that marked out the Balblair, as distillery manager John MacDonald says, "making whisky should be a craft, not a process".

I had the rare privilege of a private tasting with Stuart Baxter, the brand ambassador for Balblair, albeit via Zoom. Baxter underlines the time-intensive methods for making Balblair: The distillery is not run to its full installed capacity; they run a longer than usual fermentation cycle of 62 hours, and have an extremely slow distillation time of four and a half hours. The new make spirit that results says Baxter is like a tea biscuit, delicate and crisp.

Noteworthy

The whisky that I tasted was the Balblair 12, and is at 46 per cent ABV and non-chill filtered. It's also been matured on-site in a combination of double-fired American oak casks and ex-bourbon casks. All the care that has been taken in the making and maturation of the whisky finally pays off when I put it to the taste test. The esters and aldehydes produced in the process have fruity and tropical notes. The intense esters help in bringing out the core characteristics of apricots, oranges, spices, floral notes and green apples, while the heavier oils and lipids lend it a leathery and nutty characteristic. The result is a whisky with a warm, complex character and a sweet, citrusy aroma. The palate offers notes of oranges, honey, and cinnamon before a long, creamy finish with hints of vanilla and leather. In short, it is a perfect blend of fruit, spice, and sweetness.

No more shots please!

Tequila is just one of many white spirits that have been clubbed under generic nomenclature for all things 'shots' and made from agave. But there's an unexplored colony of drinks beyond it.

By **GAGAN SHARMA**

PISTOL
100% AGAVE
MAYA
PISTOLA
100% AGAVE
40%
REPOSADO

HOMING IN
India's addition to agave spirits: Pistola Agavepura; Pistola's signature drink. Papa Don't Preach (Below)

A decade ago, no party ever wrapped up before a round of Tequila shots, followed by morning vows of never touching the spirit again. Those shots simply shouted: 'Give me something cheap, that I can gulp without tasting'. Neither was there any knowledge backing the drink, nor any motivation to look beyond cheap labels. Who spent on shots anyway, right? In fact, the riff of your mid-20s angst would lose soul if you discovered that those salt-rimmed, lemon wedged fiery liquids weren't even pure Tequilas; definitely not the culturally-driven Mexican heritage drink for sure. But all that is finally changing now.

The pandemic helped us evolve from straight drinks to cocktails and exploring new spirits. Those heavily-aged, have-encyclopaedic-knowledge-before-approaching-me brown spirits were edged out by edgier, easier, amicable white ones. While in India it was gin, pure premium Tequilas grabbed the global pie. Since 2010, the market has doubled; it's further growing precipitously, with premium Tequilas peaking at an 83 per cent fold! There was time layered by intent that allowed us the privilege of unlearning and relearning about the drink that was never really truly befriended. But it looks like this newly discovered love for agave spirits and Tequilas is going to keep bars and imbibers spirited for a long time to come.

AGAVE: WHAT GIVES

Once you go pure, you don't return to that edgy firewater. Although 'Tequila' has been bastardised into common nomenclature for all things shots and made from agave. Agave too, much like grains and grapes, isn't the sole base, there are many more. However, Tequila hails from a GI-tagged region of Mexico with certain quality and prestige attached such as Champagne in France, Scotch in whiskies, or Cognac in brandies. Even within the category of Tequila there's a schism between Puro and Mixtos, the latter being a mix of base ingredients against a single origin 100 per cent agave-based spirit. Then there's Mezcal—cult, crafty, rural, and revered—a connoisseurs' delight. Sotol, considered the lesser loved child of the family, also enjoys

its own status of sorts locally. Around the world, countries such as California, Japan, Australia, Peru, Venezuela, and of course India, produce this spirit and categorise it under the generic title of 'agave spirits'.

AGAVE IN INDIA

Patron, Don Julio, Corralejo, El Jimador, Herradura Tequilas and Creyente, Del Maguey, Clase Azul Mezcals have globally been drivers for the premium category, and now India has added to the list with its homegrown label, Pistola Agavepura. Rakshay Dhariwal, the suave hospitality major who heads SAZ, Ping's Oriental, Jamun, and Asia's 50 Best Bars ranked PCO in the capital, wanted to be creative during the lockdown and Pistola was the direct result. "Before the pandemic, we saw clients drifting towards premium Tequilas, asking us to source special bottles. These were proper 100 per cent Puro de Agave labels, so they knew what they were drinking. I wanted to follow this shift. During the lockdown, I wondered how to get inside people's homes besides food, which we had been doing anyway. So I came up with the idea of creating everything from bottled cocktails to tonic water, to our own gin, but settled for an agave-based drink that would put India on the map."

Much like wines, ciders, rums, and cognacs, anything that's made with fruits or plants is heavily influenced by provenance and terroir. Agave drinks are no different. India's tryst with the plant goes back a couple of centuries! India has a ton growing wildly from Shimla to the Deccan Plateau. "When Queen Victoria visited India, she ordered the planting of agave bordering railway tracks to protect animals from hitting them", says Dhariwal. But apart from catering to Indian palates, the product has to work in export markets too. It all depends on the potential of the Indian terroir, but purity remains a foremost concern.

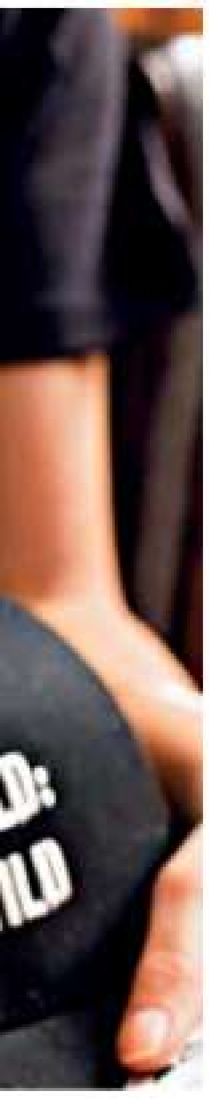
PROVENANCE MATTERS

'100 per cent Puro de Agave' is a spirit made purely from agave plants. If you've been drinking spirits around the ₹1800-2000 mark, chances are they aren't Puro, instead they're what's called Mixtos, created from a variety of base ingredients. Though a dominant and essential part of the game, it's not what's driving the change. These Puro de Agave spirits will always be expensive.

THINK WI
DRINK W

GRAN PATRON
Burdeos
GRAN PATRON
Burdeos
GRAN PATRON
Burdeos

BARRELING THROUGH
Patron's Puro de Agave preps in the barrels (Left);



HOMECOMING

India is already upping the revelries as Jai Solanki, the chef-owner of Lair, New Delhi, is gearing up to open the floodgates for local palates by hosting the first-ever Agave Fest in Goa in January. In Goa's true carnival spirit, it will bring together gourmands, popular bars and their mixologists, and connoisseurs alike over thumping music, and games across January 6-7, 2023 at W Goa. Who would have thought we would see this in India? If that's not a sign that India is Agave adjacent, then what is?

IN HIGH SPIRITS
Lair's Paloma - Tequila–Rose and Kewra extract, Grapefruit, Citrus, Tonic Water, Kaffir Lime salt (Left)
Pistola's Maya Berry Cha (Above)

It takes seven kilos of agave to make a litre of Puro spirit, and agave isn't cheap. Befriending the spirit is as geeky an affair as that of Cognacs, single malt whiskies, and age-statement rums. It solicits patience, trials, and indulgence. Social media plays an important role in driving these changes. And who is a better influencer than a celebrity?

CELEBRITIES STEP IN

Celebs have been biting into the agave craze since George Clooney got in and sold his label, Casamigos, for a whooping USD1 billion. Teremana (The Rock), Lobos 1707 (LeBron James), Cincoro (Michael Jordan), Villa One (Nick Jonas), Don Ramon (Pierce Brosnan) and 818 (Kendall Jenner) have all followed suit. "They definitely help the category grow and can open gateways for craft spirits too", says Bacardi India's Jonas Ax, who's heading Patron. Dhariwal concurs: "They not only make people drink better, but add an extra dollop of oomph to drinks and rituals". If Tequila has been a Hispanic celebration, celebs' endorsements definitely open the market to other communities. Though, there are obvious advantages, purists believe that the cult of celebrity can divert attention from the nuances of Tequila, its provenance, and heritage, which actually make it a great drink. The fine line between homage and appropriation is blurring. However, for Indians, that's a worry for a distant future.

BARTENDERS' POISON

Whether neat, on ice, or with a dash of sparkling water, or mixed with cocktails, the agave spirits' bug is sure to catch on. Considered the most mixable spirit, bartenders are halleluah-ing every passing moment. At the end of US's prohibition era (circa 1930-40s), cocktail revolution brought Margaritas to the fore and they've never really left. Picantes, Palomas, Margaritas, not only accentuate the provenance, prowess, and finesse of the base spirit but are loved equally on either side of the bar. "Earlier it was gin, now there's a rapid shift towards agave spirits. In our new menu, there are eight agave-based cocktails, a drastic increase from just three. Agave spirits and spices pair well, they do justice to Indian palates, and we're trying to bring classics back with a new touch. Even our guests ask us, what else can we do with the spirit" shares Navjot Singh, head bartender of Lair, New Delhi, that's single handedly responsible for bringing Picante in the limelight and making Paloma sexy again.

WHITEWASHING THE FUTURE

Dhariwal is adding more shades to Pistola's spectrum with a Joven, Anejo, Phoenix Anejo, and an interesting Rosa, a Cabernet Sauvignon barrel aged Reposado with a pink hue. Meanwhile, Patron has already made a honey and coffee flavoured rendition. Especially in India where there's no right path to the spirit and a lack of definition for local produce, the opportunities are endless. And with the advent of Indian gin, conversation about flavours has only expanded. "There's definitely a big market for flavoured variants; we are a population of 1.4billion, there's space for everything, just not now", adds Dhariwal. Jonas agrees: "We would like people to decode the spirit first and then move to flavoured ones". Either way, it's more than just a fad. Once you befriend a pure agave spirit, you will never return to those rough and ready firewater of spirits that filled your shot glasses earlier. For that merit alone, we should raise a toast. Salud!

Cutting EDGE

The iconic multi-tool Swiss Army knife celebrates its 125th anniversary

By **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**

In his book, "*An Astronaut's Guide to Life on Earth*', Chris Hadfield, a Canadian astronaut who has spent more than 4000 hours in space explains on one page about a particular space mission, where he had to open the door to a Russian Space Station, and he could not do so with the tools provided. He finally remembered his Swiss Army Knife and that got the job done. He then wrote of the Swiss Army Knife: "Never leave the planet without one!"

Now that is a hero's way to honour a product that has gone from being an army knife to a global icon? When Karl Elsener founded his cutlery workshop in Ibach, Schwyz, back in 1884, I wonder if he realised the unprecedented success that Victorinox would achieve. Four generations later, it includes household and professional knives, watches, travel gear and fragrances in its portfolio. But the Swiss Army Knife remains its most iconic offering; the little red knife has been in the market for 125 years now.

What explains its cult status?

"It is not just one feature—the quality and functionality of the Swiss Army Knife (SAK) plays a very important role, which is why the SAK is so popular. They are also very useful on adventure trips because many expeditions to the North Pole, Mount Everest and to the Amazon are always equipped with our Swiss Army Knives," concludes Carl Elsener, Victorinox CEO and fourth generation of the family-owned company.

THE POWER OF PROVENANCE
Both quality and functionality outline the SAK's iconic status and popularity

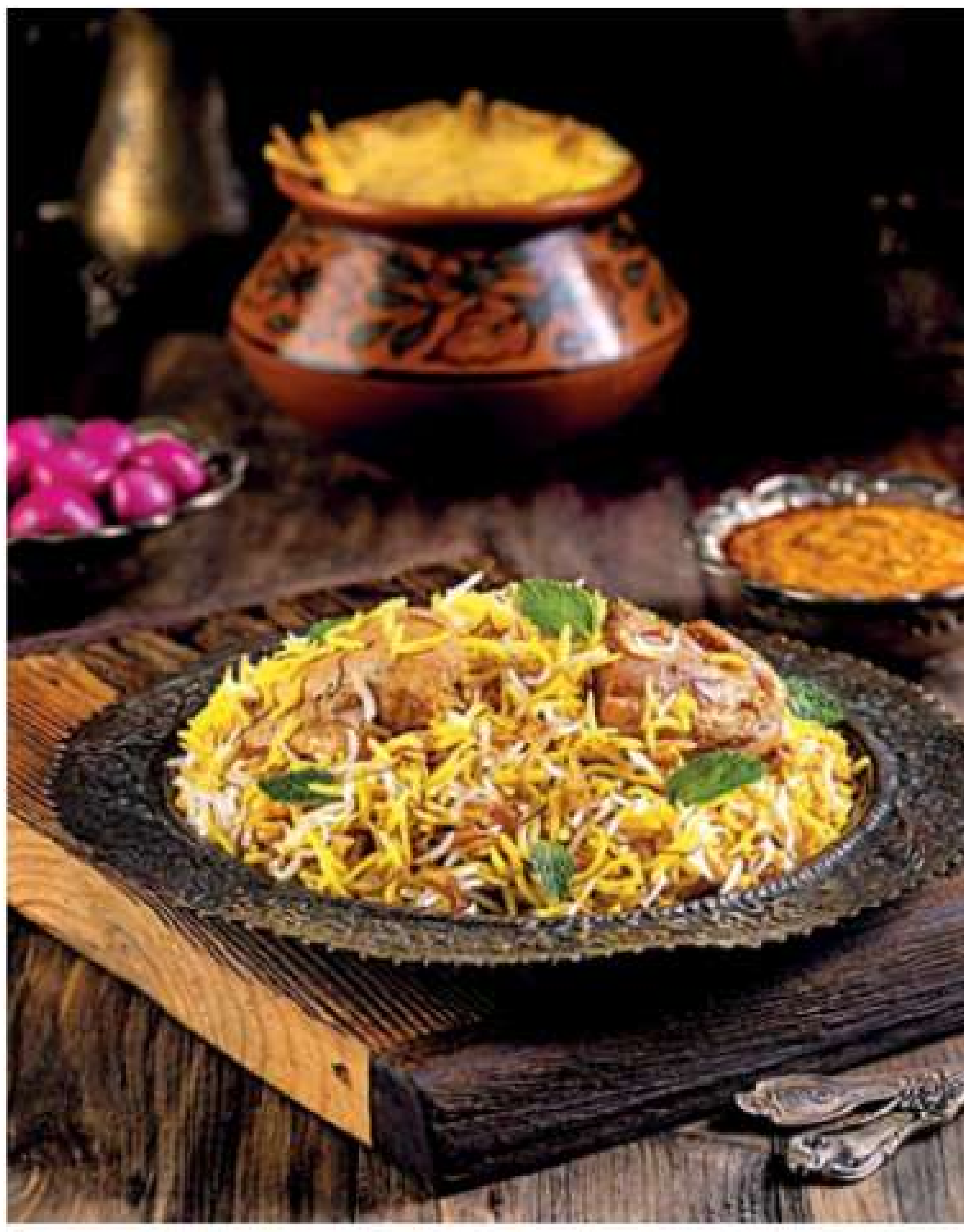
While the company has created special limited editions for the customers and consumers to celebrate and commemorate this landmark milestone, "for our teams, globally, we have decided to do something special. Time spent with family is of immense value, therefore, we have offered teams around the world a free paid holiday on their birthday so they can spend it with their families and share with us anecdotes of their time and hopefully instances when they used the little red knife," informs Elsener. Now that's truly celebratory!

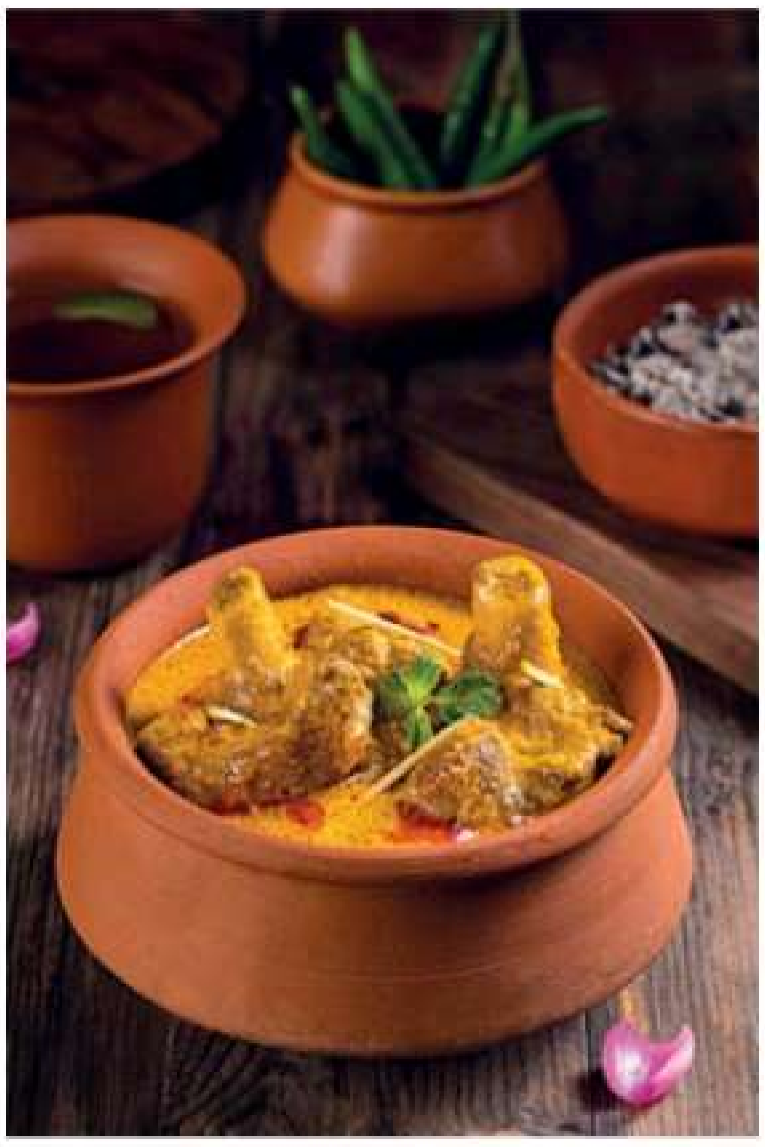
Crown Jewels

Uncover the glorious vignettes of heirloom recipes from the royal kitchens of the Nizams.

By **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**

What is it about tradition that evades the tyranny of time? Why is the past the dominant flavour in a royal repast? Interestingly, the answer to both these questions simply wrestle for place on a plate of Deccan delicacies at Diya—The Leela Ambience Gurugram. The Indian specialty restaurant is hosting 'The Nizami Feast', a month-long festival celebrating culinary gems from the royal kitchens of the Nizams of Hyderabad. Curated and crafted by three master chefs, this succulent feast, perfected on slow fire with heirloom recipes, simply spells a tsunami of flavour and flair. If you have been waiting for a trip to charming Hyderabad to discover landmark dishes such as Pathar ka Gosht, Haleem, Baghaar-e-Baigan, and Chilman Biryani, you can save yourself some carbon miles.





* **ARCHITECTS OF THE PAST**
From left to Right: Ashwani Kumar Singh, Executive Sous Chef, Abhishek Gupta, Executive Chef, Athar Ali, Master chef, Dharmendra Singh, Junior Sous chef (Below)

Hyderabadi, also referred to as Deccani cuisine uses the masterful art of slow cooking across dishes. While a rather significant chunk of the royal recipes remain a carnivore's delight, but this royal showcase includes a number of recipes rendered specially for the plant-forward demographic as well. A particularly effusive shout-out goes to the subz shikhampuri kebab—wholesome and flavoursome, it holds a creamy underlayer of yogurt in its belly. The fact that it melts in your mouth in a cloud of spice and firm veggie mash makes it as surprising as it is sensational. Save some space to savour the sweet Hyderabadi nawabi falooda—a stunning mélange of colour, flavour, temperature and texture.

Where Diya, The Leela Ambience, Gurugram
When Till December 27
Cost starts at ₹7,000 (Tasting menu for two)

RUMI WITH A VIEW

A Sufi-themed luxury retreat nestled in the Zabarwan Hills of Srinagar, Qayaam Gah, is the perfect escape from the dubious pleasures of city life

By **AMIT DIXIT**

DELIVERANCE
Evenings give over to the flow of soul and sufi (right) at Qayaam Gah

Photos ALTAF CHAPRI

A few low-slung buildings lie scattered around an orchard of plum, pear, cherry and apple trees. The Zabarwan Hills and Dachigam National Park loom behind. In front lies the shimmering sprawl of the Dal—a view to die for. Have I indeed died, because this is paradise for sure. I arrive at Qayaam Gah, Srinagar's hottest hotel opening of the year, at the magical hour of dusk. As I step out of the 4WD that has transported me up the pebbled dirt track, the cold makes its undeniable presence felt. Autumn, Kashmir's most beautiful season, is giving way to winter. Can my Delhi lungs handle the crisp-as-an-apple mountain air, I wonder?

With just seven keys, Qayaam Gah is as exclusive as it gets. For proprietor Altaf Chapri—who also runs the Sukoon Houseboat in Srinagar and the beachside Neeleshwar Hermitage in Kerala—Qayaam Gah has been, quite literally, a labour of love. It was eight years in the making—and planned for even longer—progress coming to a standstill several times due to the socio-political upheavals that Kashmir is no stranger to, not to mention the Covid pandemic. Altaf has weathered it all with Sufi-style detachment.

Indeed, Sufism is the very raison d'être of Qayaam Gah. "In the spiritual symbolism of Sufism, qayaam signifies the highest mystical state," says Chapri,"First comes ***sukoon***, the unshakeable peace, then with time this matures into qayaam, the ultimate station. ***Qayaam*** is the experience of unity with everything, the conscious and unbroken enjoyment of the oneness of life."

Nor is having seven rooms a coincidence. The number is significant in religions across the world, including Sufism which speaks of the 'Dance of the Seven Veils', which represents the journey to Enlightenment. Some of the rooms too are named after Sufi poets. My airy and commodious villa is called 'Rumi', after everyone's favourite Sufi mystic.

Heaven Sent

Qayaam Gah is a symphony in wood and stone, delightfully glocal in its approach to interior design. While it's broadly underpinned by the best of contemporary minimalism, quiet Kashmiri touches have been brought in with latticework and decorative objects. The restrained colour palette makes deft use of beiges, greys and muted blues to stunning effect. Strategic bursts of colour are provided by antique carpets and kilims, all family heirlooms. As an aesthete with a keen eye for detail who has travelled well and observed deeply, Chapri brings a refined sensibility to the Qayaam Gah experience. It's all beautifully restful.

Nor have mod cons been sacrificed in the process. The television was so discreetly tucked away I would not have known of its existence if I hadn't spotted the remote by my bedside. The sturdy cast-iron fireplace lived up to its promise. There was a stone tub in the bathroom, a twin vanity, and a shower that dispensed ample amounts of hot water. At Qayaam Gah the cold-prone have no reason to fret. Apart from the fireplace, there's hot and cool air-conditioning, electric blankets, hot water bottles and endless cups of saffron kahwa that warm the very soul. And for those of us who truly cherish being connected, the wi-fi is excellent.

There's an eye on sustainability and engaging the local community. The plastic-free property hopes to go fully solar at some point. The fresh milk for my tea came from cows that Qayaam Gah has given to a village resident to look after (they then buy the milk from her). No trees were displaced in the process of building the property. All the furniture was made on site, a nod to the Kashmiri tradition of wood-working.

Given this is Kashmir, it's no surprise that food is a big part of the experience. The kitchen is

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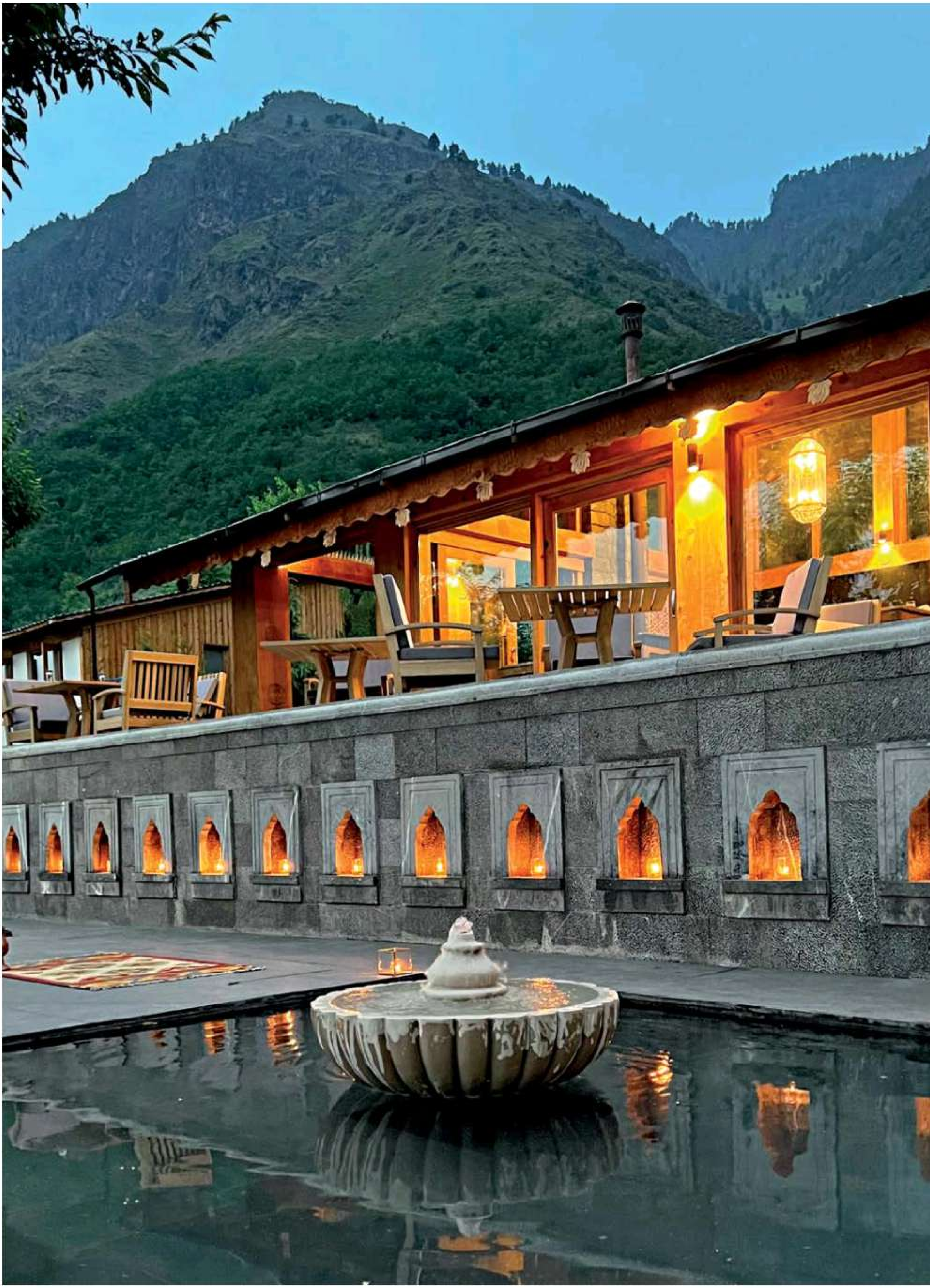
FOOD FOR THE SOUL
Kashmiri festive platters (Right) and tasteful interiors (Below) are just two of the highlights of a stay at Qayaam Gah



helmed by Chef Anupam, a maestro of Asian and continental fare who entices guests with his imaginative creations and dainty presentation. The Kashmiri dishes are by the shy Chef Tabassum who nevertheless wears her chef's toque and jacket with visible pride. She hails from a family of *wazas*, the traditional cooks who rustle up those legendary Kashmiri wedding feasts, so you know you're getting the real deal. The trami here is not to be skipped.

Experiences at Qayaam Gah include yoga and meditation sessions and walks in the surrounding forests armed with sumptuous picnic lunches. I walked uphill with a passionate naturalist who knew every bird and bush we encountered on the way.

High tea is an unforgettable experience, and was the highlight of my stay. As we stuffed ourselves with delicious sandwiches and fish fingers and some more kahwa, local musicians armed with rabab, nout, harmonium and mellifluous voices sang the most soulful Sufi songs. Across the all-weather infinity pool, Srinagar twinkled in the fading light. The tealights in the alcoves twinkled too. A water feature gurgled soothingly. The bonfire raged.

I retreated to my room, where the sweet smell of cedar hung in the air, and leafed through a copy of Coleman Barks *'A Year With Rumi'*, opening pages at random. Twice the book opened at the same page. It read:

The way you make love
is the way God will be with you.

Qayaam Gah has a lot going for it, from the view to its tranquil setting, the thoughtfully-curated experiences and the hospitality that seems to come so naturally to the Kashmiris. This is truly paradise regained.

FACT FILE

ACCOMMODATION Villas 4; Suites 3. Location 20km (30min) from Srinagar airport.

TARIFF Minimum stay is two nights. Tariff Two nights (villa) ₹75,455; Suite ₹62,500. The rates are inclusive of airport transfers, all meals, complimentary yoga for beginners, a short uphill walk through orchards and all taxes.

CONTACT reservations@abchapriretreats.in; www.abchapriretreats.in

ACTIVITIES

AT THE PROPERTY Two walks on offer: an uphill one in the buffer zone of Dachigam National Park and an easier one on mostly flat land that ends at Harwan Garden. Both can include lunch in scenic settings. There's daily high tea with music. In-depth yoga and meditation sessions are also offered.

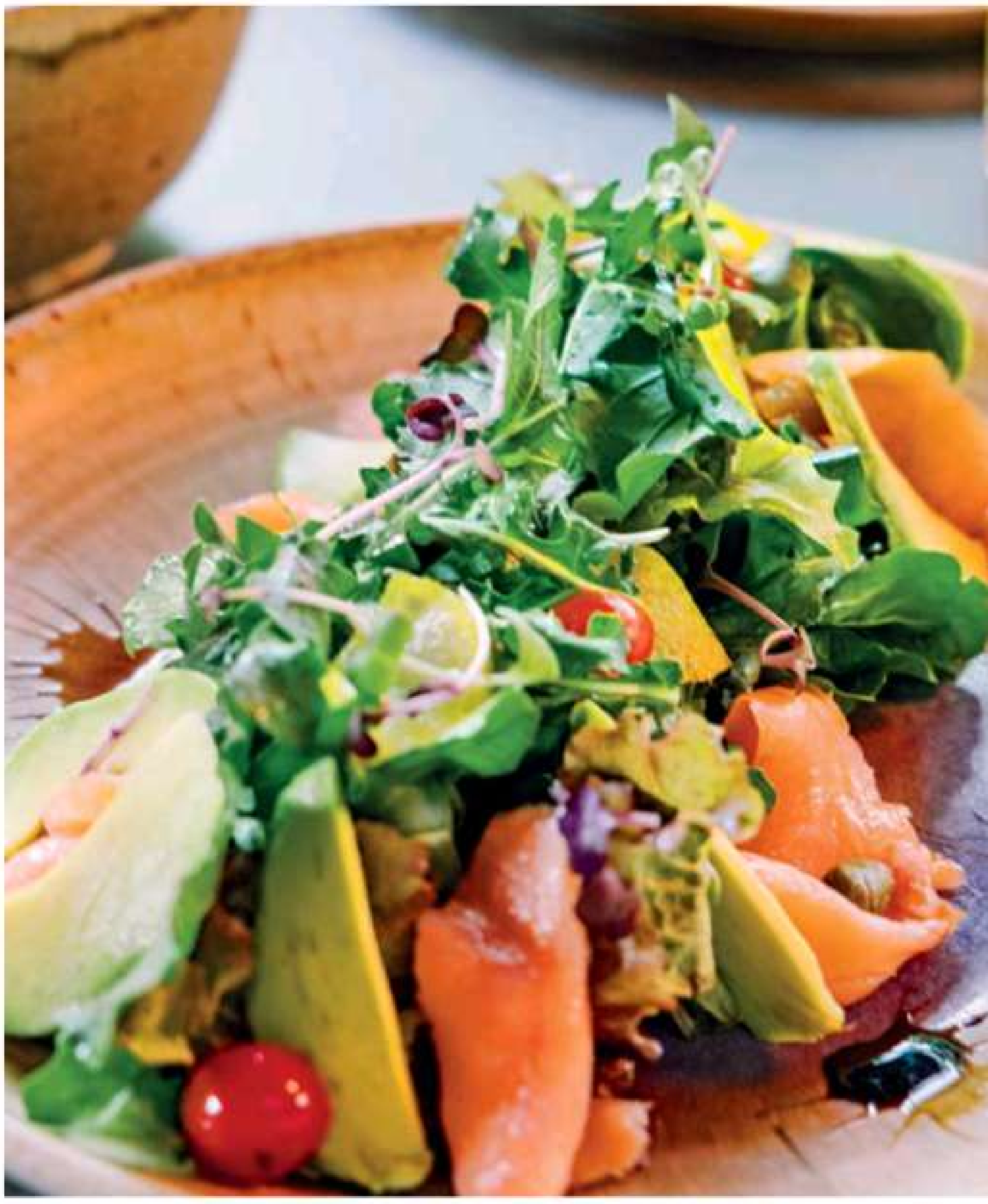
IN SRINAGAR Visits to the floating vegetable market and Mughal gardens, Old City walk with guide, shikara ride, paragliding (May to October), and shopping.

Conscious Indulgence

When it comes to walking the talk, Fig at Malcha, puts its money where its mouth is.

By **CHUMKI BHARADWAJ**

Manish Yadav, Co-founder of 'Fig at Malcha' makes a very interesting observation on post-pandemic eating habits: "Revenge eating has transitioned to conscious indulgence," says the owner-restaurateur. "People like to know where the food on their plate comes from, how it impacts their health and even the people, community and the environment around." 'Mindful eating' is precisely the promise and premise at his delightful eatery. This eco-contemporary and conscious food collective inspires flavourful, healthy, ethical, and plant-forward cuisine that melds Japanese design and Nordic lifestyle in a café-curated menu and artsy space. So imagine 100 per cent GMO-free meat, cage-free eggs, a Parisian-style bistro with an in-house bakery that bakes—and smells of—fresh bread and pastries. For those with a caffeine crush, there's a 'farm-to-cup' speciality coffee on offer as well. We recommend the Avocado earth bowl, Sicilian Burrata Salad, Butter Garlic prawns and the Beer Battered fish and chips.
Where Fig at Malcha, 3/48, Malcha Marg Market, Diplomatic Enclave, New Delhi
Cost ₹2,500 (Meal for two)



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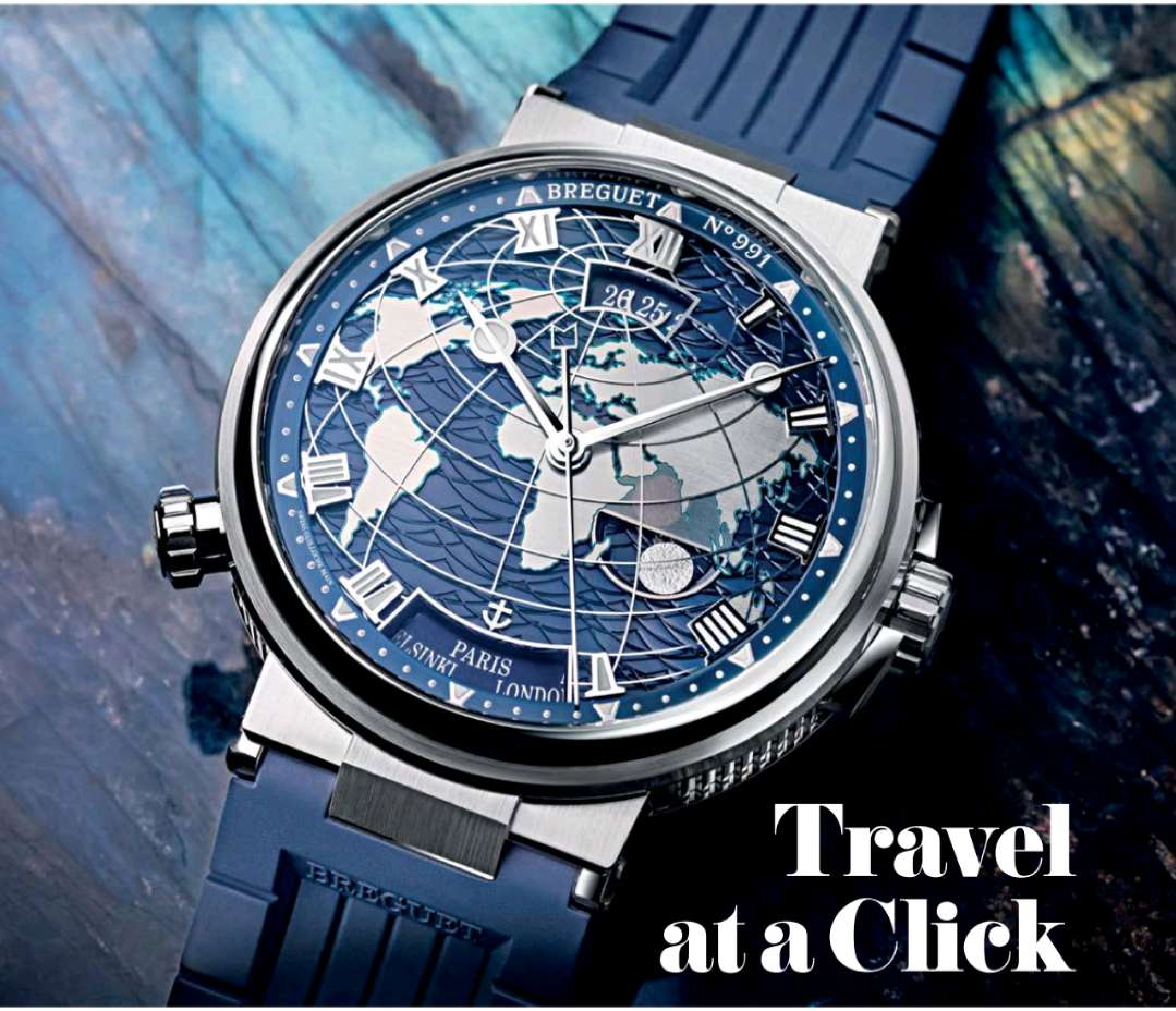
MINDFUL EATING
The food is fresh, flavourful, and hearty with soups and salads leading the charge of the light brigade. (Left and Above right)

Shop, Eat, Repeat

With passionately curated interiors and an artisanal menu, this is Paris on the go.

Beyond Designs Bistro conflates life's greatest pleasures: food and shopping. Located within the Beyond Designs flagship store, its recent makeover and new menu, make this chandelier-studded, art-filled space a stellar combination. Chic and warm at the same time, the food is interesting and appetising although service is a little slow. But it allows you time to browse through the store to benefit both home and hearth.
Where Opp. Sultanpur Metro Station; **Cost** ₹2,500 (Meal for two)

LAST LOOK



Travel at a Click

One of its more technically advanced models, the Hora Mundi became an instant hit when it was launched. With the 5557-Marine Hora Mundi, the luxury marque Breguet awes with a new interpretation of its Hora Mundi model within the Marine collection, combining technical and aesthetic achievements. It features a critical asset in the shape of an instant-change dual-time display. Visual escapism is part of the wrist play as hand-guilloché waves lap gently against the shores of the continents on the first gold base. The sunburst dial base fitted out in abyssal blue creates the impression of a permanent waltz of the wave motifs. The sun and moon positioned at 4 o'clock are hand-hammered to create a strongly realistic result; while the sun is a luminous rose gold, the moon in rhodium-plated glory exudes a mysterious grey appearance. Stellar!

Price on request; **Availability** Brand Stores

—By Chumki Bharadwaj

देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

aajtak.in/app

उपलब्ध है

12:30
होम
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कार्यक्रम
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NOIDA
बड़ी ख़बरें
लाइव टीवी

नमस्कार!

Missed Daily Capsule?
Tap to see it again.

बड़ी ख़बरें

जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

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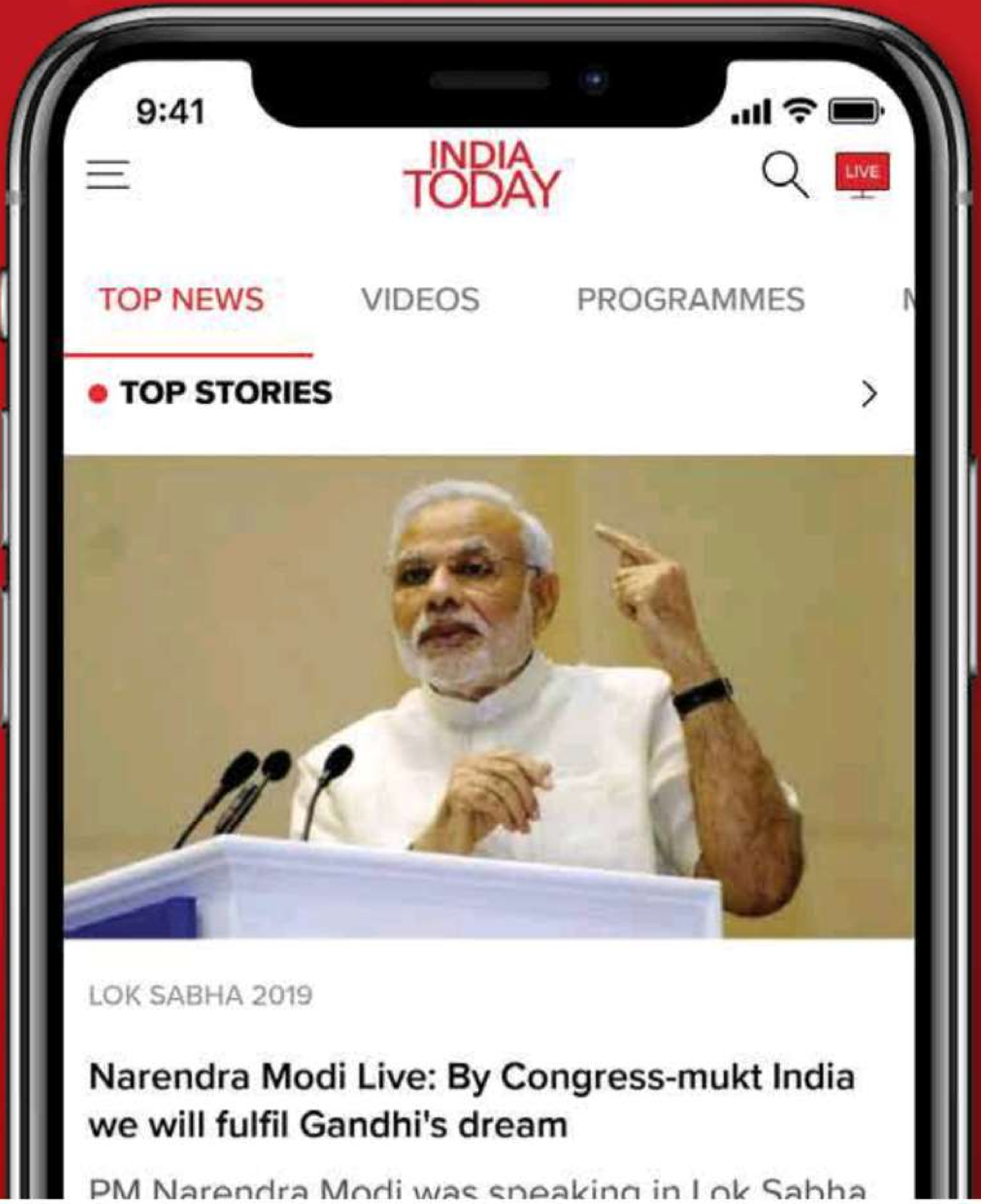

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